

Saudi Arabian Diplomacy during the Syrian Humanitarian Crisis: Domestic Pressure, Multilateralism, and Regional Rivalry for an Islamic State

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I Did Saudi Arabia Lead the Arab States?

This paper aims to evaluate Saudi Arabian diplomacy and its influence in response to the Syrian humanitarian crisis triggered during the “Arab Spring” in March 2011. The Saudi Arabian government faced internal pressure to raise support for the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Once the government launched an active foreign policy to counter the Syrian regime, they timed their activities effectively to avoid isolation from the international community, appealed to the Arab League, and arranged a covert supply of weapons to the Syrian rebels aiming for a change in the Syrian regime.

Reports state that Saudi Arabia has led Arab efforts to end the bloodshed in Syria since the summer of 2011. Some have praised the Saudi policy as “humanitarian”; others applaud it as a “wise” or “progressive” policy, targeted at realizing justice for Syrian citizens (1). Saudi Arabia was reported to have circulated among members of the UN General Assembly, before the vote of February 11, 2012, a draft resolution backing an Arab peace plan for Syria; however, the following day the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) denied reports that Saudi Arabia had formally

presented a new draft resolution, citing an official at the foreign ministry (2). It can be said that Saudi Arabia aimed to erase such an impression in the media that it had manipulated international negotiations behind closed doors.

Given the adoption of Saudi Arabia's new and active policy in 2011 to commit to ending the Syrian humanitarian crisis, it is useful to evaluate the nation's goals, power, and influence. After the outbreak of the "Arab Spring," other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, especially Qatar, also started to take an active role in resolving crisis situations in Yemen, Libya, and Syria. The purpose of this chapter is to reveal the underlying motivations and the diplomacy and statecraft of Saudi Arabia, a major regional power. What will be the end result of Saudi Arabia, the "conservative monarchy", supporting the Syrian revolutionary cause?

On August 7, 2011, King 'Abdullāh, the Saudi monarch, made an official and historic statement in public through the SPA calling upon all Syrian brothers to stop the "killing machine," to restore rationality before it became too late, and to immediately enforce reforms (hereafter, the "'Abdullāh statement"). It was also announced that the Saudi ambassador in Syria was to be recalled for consultations (3). The 'Abdullāh statement was a surprise, the first unexpected and clear expression of disapproval for Syria's Asad regime voiced by an Arab state. It has been described as the first strong condemnation delivered by the Saudi Arabian government since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and an extraordinary one at that, given that the king spoke directly to the people of Syria, bypassing their government (4). Kuwait and Bahrain followed Saudi Arabia in recalling their ambassadors from Syria, and other Arab states and the secretary-general of the League of Arab States began to express criticism of Syria. Saudi Arabia had previously been regarded as a supporter of the undemocratic and oppressive Syrian state that disregarded human rights. What were the reasons behind Saudi Arabia's shift in policy regarding Syria?

II Domestic Pressure and Multilateral Diplomacy

The 'Abdullāh statement was the first official criticism lodged against Syria by an Arab state. Yet, UN human rights officials, Turkey, and various Western states had previously expressed their expectations of an end to the violent oppression of Syrian citizens and the immediate implementation of reforms since March 2011. In July 2011, Syrian security forces intensified their attacks in Ḥamāh, probably since Syrian government worried the uprising in Ḥamāh, which was the stronghold of revolt by Muslim Brotherhood in 1982.

On July, 18, 2011, Qatar government announced withdrawal of its ambassador from Syria and closure of its embassy. This announcement seemed a reaction to attacks on the Qatari embassy by militias which were inferred to be loyal to Asad regime. Al Jazīra TV, based its main office in Qatar, continued to report uprisings and repression in Syria since its beginning, and official Syrian media regularly accused foreign news services of using fabricated images on the uprising. This announcement by the Qatari government was the first opposition by an Arab government against Asad regime since March 2011. Saudi Arabian government probably sensed the high time to disclose their policy toward Syrian crisis as the situation was deteriorating and their “friendly rival” Qatar was involved in the escalation.

On July 31, the eve of the holy month of Ramadan, another massacre occurred in Ḥamāh, killing more than 120 people. Italy became the first European state to recall their ambassador from Syria for consultation on August 2, 2011. The Italian foreign minister condemned Syria for its “horrible repression against the civilian population.” In response to the massacre, non-Arab states expressed condemnation of Syria; the Turkish President Abdullah Gül condemned the brutality in Syria on August 3, 2011.

Before the 'Abdullāh statement, Islamic scholars and an Arab poet had appealed

for Muslim leaders to support the Syrian people. On April 29, 2011, Saudi intellectuals issued an open statement on the Internet “regarding the crimes by the Syrian regime against our Syrian brothers.” They cited the Prophet and stated that the Shām (greater Syria) is the land blessed by Allah (the God). They further stated that the Syrian people were simply seeking their legitimate Islamic rights and an end to injustice. The group of intellectuals appealed to security personnel and soldiers in Syria to stop hostile acts against their people and to protect them instead. They claimed that Muslims are obliged to support their “brothers” and offered advice to their Syrian brothers to take refuge from this catastrophe (5).

The scholars who signed the statement were not among the highest-ranking in Saudi Arabian Islamic circles, but they provided sufficient authority to criticize the Syrian government. By the end of April 2011, the international community had not proposed enough concrete measures to solve the Syrian humanitarian crisis, marking a contrast from its proactive stance towards the situations in Yemen and Libya. Meanwhile, the oppression by the Syrian government worsened, which is the likely reason why Muslim scholars openly expressed their concerns regarding the developing Syrian calamity.

In Saudi Arabia, a popular Islamic orator in a mosque appealed for support for Syria through satellite television programs. Sheikh Muḥammad al-‘Arīfī, who had acquired his Ph.D. at Imām Muḥammad bin Su‘ūd University in Riyāḍ in 2001, became a speaker in al-Bawārdī Mosque in Riyāḍ in 2006 (6). Sheikh al-‘Arīfī was still considered “young” (in his early 40s) and represented a new type of mosque speaker with numerous television appearances to his credit. In more recent years, he has become quite popular and has gained even more renown as a powerful advocate of support for Syrian Sunni Muslims.

At a Friday sermon on May 6, 2011, Sheikh al-‘Arīfī described President Asad as a “*farao*” (dictator) and blamed him for the arrests and killings carried out by

Syrian security forces. He then called for support for the oppressed by shouting “the leaders in the Ummah (Islamic community) are obliged to oppose barbarous acts.” This speech was broadcast on the satellite TV channel, Wiṣāl TV, and uploaded to YouTube (7).

It is not known whether statements of Islamic leaders such as the above reached the masses because of the limited Internet access in Saudi Arabia. However, Sheikh al- ‘Arīfī appeared on a number of television programs and called for support for Syria, which certainly made an impact on a large number of satellite TV viewers.

In June 2011, a poet read aloud a qaṣīdah (Arabian poem) to drum up support for Syria on YouTube. The poet, Ḥayāl Waḥīd al-Shammārī, recited a long poem addressed to King ‘Abdullāh, calling upon him to support the Syrian cause (posted on YouTube June 15, 2011). He described the killing of children by the Syrian authorities and Syrian soldiers dancing in a mosque after their destruction. More than 20 times, the poet addressed the king by his nickname, “Yā Abū Mit īb (“the father of Mit īb,” the elder son of King ‘Abdullāh, the deputy chief of the National Guard in Saudi Arabia).” Among his more striking phrases were the following: “the brother of Nūrah, protect them (the oppressed),” “you are the shield for truth,” and “people enjoy justice under your governance” (8). These phrases implied that the king could also share such pain as he had sisters. Saudi Arabian society still maintains the traditional value and custom that one has to bestow protection on those who seek it, and the poet appealed to the king by reminding him of this value.

The poet’s name “Shammar” has its origins in the name of the tribe to which the king’s mother belongs. The members of the Shammar tribe inhabit a wide swath of land bridging Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan, and the poet used this fortunate affiliation to appeal to King ‘Abdullāh. The qaṣīdah was written in

Arabic with the formality of a Saudi Arabian style of *qaṣīdah* in order to create maximum emotional impact on Saudi nationals. While the YouTube post was viewed only 160,000 times (by February 2011), its ripple effects should not be underestimated as word-of-mouth communications could also have helped to amplify its influence.

Muslim scholars, orators, and tribal poets all used the latest communication tools such as Web sites, satellite television, and YouTube, to convey their messages from some distance to King ‘Abdullāh (who since his youth has been known as someone in touch with popular sentiments).

The speeches by Sheikh ‘Arīfī and the poem by Shammarī no doubt heightened the expectations of Saudis and Syrians that the Saudi government would take some action. After the ‘Abdullāh statement, scenes from five demonstrations in the Saudi capital and other cities across the country were uploaded onto YouTube. Two demonstrations took place in Riyāḍ on August 7, 2011. Saudi youth called the Syrian President Asad “the dog of Ummah,” and shouted, “the Arab people are united” (9). In Jiddah, dozens of Syrians marched holding the Saudi national flag, crying, “we sacrifice our lives for the king” (10). Some of the participants recorded in the march in Khubar, an eastern province, were looking straight at the camera (11).

In each YouTube video, the participants in the marches or demonstrations seemed excited, but these clips could have been staged with the intention of being uploaded onto YouTube. The demonstrations may have been “permitted” by the Saudi authorities, if only for a short time. From watching the YouTube videos, it is difficult to determine whether they were organized under government instructions or voluntarily. However, it must be noted that it would not have been easy even for the Saudi government to have legitimately dissolved demonstrations denouncing the massacres in Syria once they had gathered momentum.

The speeches by the religious figures and the street demonstrations brought about risks similar to those experienced in the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Palestine issue became a chance for the Saudi government to rally public opinion and divert the attention of Saudi Arabians from domestic issues to an external issue—but only if they had adequate policies in place. If public opinion ascribed responsibility for the Palestine occupation to the Saudi government, with the suggestion that they could not have effectively protected Palestine instead of blaming Israel, then the legitimacy of Saudi rule would have been severely damaged. The Syrian humanitarian crisis was developing into a similar risk for the Saudi government; however, the 'Abdullāh statement was successful in turning public opinion in the government's favor. The goal of the Saudi government was to influence public opinion in Saudi Arabia to believe that the perceived lack of support for the Syrian humanitarian crisis was a result of a failure by the international community, despite efforts made by Saudi Arabia.

The UN security council statement to condemn violence in Syria was passed on August 3, 2011. The U.S. consulted with France and Britain on August 5, 2011 to discuss additional measures to end the oppression in Syria. White House spokesman, Jay Carney said, "Syria would be a better place without Asad" (12). The following day, on August 6, the GCC issued a statement to call for the immediate end to the violence and bloodshed in Syria (13). The 'Abdullāh statement was released the following day, at a time when world powers were indicating that it was time to take tougher measures. The speech followed the GCC announcement and took a harder line than that of the GCC.

On August 7, Sheikh Ahmad Ṭayeb of Al-Azhar University called for an end to the Syrian tragedy (14), enhancing the significance of the 'Abdullāh statement. As the 'Abdullāh statement was announced in the month of Ramadan, it acquired a nuanced meaning defending Islamic guidance and was addressed to the entire Islamic world. Saudi media later referred to the 'Abdullāh statement as "the

statement announced in Ramadan.” In Syria, on August 9, 2011, a gathering took place in Ḥumṣ. Participants waved the Saudi flag and called “Abū Mit ḥib” in loud voices and prayed for the long life of King ‘Abdullāh. They also shouted, “your silence is killing us,” (15) which was a clear accusation against the international community.

In the past, Saudi diplomatic actions have been characterized as cautious and hesitant to assume the risks of unilateral action. While the ‘Abdullāh statement gave the impression of being both bold and unilateral, it was probably announced based on cautious calculations to steer toward multilateral diplomacy as per the usual. However, Saudi foreign policy definitely shifted toward active measures after the ‘Abdullāh statement.

Saudi Arabia dispatched troops to Bahrain as part of a deployment by the GCC to repress the non-violent demonstrations in Manama in March 2011. The government also suppressed demonstrations by Shia Muslims and arrested dozens of activists in Saudi Arabia. However, the criticism that Saudi Arabia had double standards did not gather momentum. The Saudi government succeeded in creating an image that showed the Sunni population in Saudi Arabia that it supported humanitarianism in Syria. There was no Arab government that could criticize the Saudi human rights situation without having to answer for their own human rights abuses. Western states were critical of the Saudi intervention in Bahrain in 2011; however, they shared a common view with Saudi Arabia in condemning the Syrian massacres and supporting regime change. No serious expert on Saudi Arabia would hope a revolution in Saudi Arabia when taking into account the production and flow of oil, world economic trends, global counterterrorism measures, stability, and the prosperity of the Middle East. Saudi Arabia refrained from further intervention in Bahrain after March 2011, preventing a second wave of criticism from the international community. The Saudi Arabian journal *The Diplomat* mentioned that there was “no crack-down in Bahrain” by the GCC

forces (16), probably with the intention of denying the violent repression of peaceful protests.

III Countering External Rivalry

Saudi Arabia had a shared interest with Syria in maintaining regional stability in the Middle East and taking a firm position against Israel within a regional context. The two nations nevertheless had been rivals regarding their respective influence in Lebanon and the protection of the Sunni population.

Saudi Arabia maintained its silence on the Ḥamāh massacre, in which it is believed that the Syrian government killed up to 20,000 Sunni inhabitants in 1982. What prevented Saudi Arabia from expressing its criticism against Syria then? Sonoko Sunayama pointed out the probability that in 1980's the Saudi government was threatened by the policy of the Syrian government to foster Saudi opposition activists, such as those who participated in the Islamic revolutionary movements in the Arabian Peninsula (17). However, the Saudi government did not have to fear Syrian counter attacks in Saudi territory because by 2011, Syria had lost its capabilities for asymmetric warfare (18), owing to the weakening anti-regime movements in Saudi Arabia and the reinforcement of Saudi counterterrorism measures.

Saudi Arabian relations with Syria worsened after the assassination of the Lebanese prime minister Rafīq al-Ḥarīrī, in 2005 and the Israel-Ḥizbullāh war in 2006 (19). Their relations, however, improved in 2009. Barack Obama took office and initiated a policy of dialogue and rapprochement with Syria, and King 'Abdullāh coordinated the Saudi Syrian policy with the U.S. and visited Damascus in December 2009 (20). On the Lebanese front, the March 14 coalition, led by Sa 'ad al-Dīn Rafīq al-Ḥarīrī, the son of the late Rafīq al-Ḥarīrī, won the legislative election in 2005, but was countered by Ḥizbullāh and agreed to the division in Beirut and shared cabinet positions. The coalition called "March 14"

led by Sa'ad al-Dīn Rafīq al-Ḥarīrī, lost the 2011 election and Najīb Mikātī, a pro-Syrian politician, was appointed the new prime minister. In short, Saudi Arabia yielded to the coalition of Ḥizbullāh, Syria, and Iran in Lebanon (21). Saudi Arabia was confronted with a decrease in its influence in Lebanon, but the Syrian government made the grave mistake of continuing its massacres in 2011, which provided an opportunity for the Saudi government to take a firm stand in opposition against Syria and to regain its influence in Lebanon.

It is obvious that Saudi criticism against Syria began with the goal of limiting Iranian influence in Syria. Saudi Arabia called for the reform of GCC integration in favor of greater unity at the GCC summit in 2011; however, the Saudi government would not dare to openly declare their enmity against Iran, nor officially state their purpose to form an Arab coalition against Iran. The reason is that probably not all Arab states were in concert out of fear of an Iranian counterattack, and still others believed that the best method was to maintain negotiations to move Iran toward rapprochement (22). In December 2011, some Saudi columnists expressed the new position that Iran would be more of a risk for Saudi Arabia than Israel—despite the fact that a large portion of the Saudi public still plainly opposes any type of hostile diplomatic policy against Muslim countries. Therefore, if the Saudi government openly initiated hard-line diplomatic actions against Iran, it would create controversy inside Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabian foreign policy aimed to achieve Islamic solidarity. Yet, in reality, the government wished its policies to remain separate from the domain of religion (23). Saudi religious figures did not advocate assistance just for Sunni Muslims in Syria, but repeatedly criticized the massacres and destruction wrought by the Syrian government in Ḥamāh and Ḥuṣṣ, which gave the impression that their criticisms were based on the belief in solidarity among Sunni Muslims. In contrast, Saudi politicians chose simple expressions of religion in their statements, such as “killing and massacre are not allowed in Religion,” with the aim to

impress their foreign policy across sectarian borders and separate it from strictly religious issues.

Saudi Arabia issued statements at the General Assembly of the United Nations as the representative of the GCC and in order to search for solutions to the humanitarian crisis in Syria. To avoid resistance to its position and proposals, Saudi Arabia refrained from any expression of sympathy for Sunni Muslims and did not discuss its wariness towards Iran in multilateral conferences. Saudi representatives have been cautious to construct their position based on universal humanitarianism to counteract the view that Saudi foreign policy aimed for Wahhābī (a conservative branch of Islam) expansion and propaganda.

Saudi official diplomacy can be described as a dual diplomacy composed of official diplomacy and the activities of religious figures. The Saudi government pushed the international society into accepting the framework of humanitarian assistance. Islamic scholars and poets appealed to the intelligence and sympathy of Muslims. However, scholars in the Middle East and the Muslim world tend to regard Saudi official diplomacy as one based on Islamic or Wahhabī ideology, ignoring the differences between the two. The Syrian government also came to believe that Saudi Arabia intended to increase their support to Sunni inhabitants in Syria and to intensify the shooting and bombing in Sunni districts, which probably transformed the character of the struggle that began in March 2011 to one shaded with sectarian violence.

IV Targeting Regime Change in Syria: A New Type of Proxy War?

Saudi Arabian diplomacy manipulated several institutional structures in the international community. They appealed to the Arab League, United Nations Security Council, and General Assembly, opened channels with Syrian rebels, and formed strategic alliances with Qatar, Turkey, and the U.S. to support Syrian rebels. The Saudi Arabian government failed to mobilize international

intervention for Syria, but succeeded in providing weapons to Syrian rebels, avoiding serious criticism.

On November 27, 2011, 19 states of the Arab League approved Syrian sanctions including ending transactions with the Central Bank of Syria. During October and November 2011, the Egyptian view, to be wary of any Western involvement, received the support of the majority in the Arab League. The League accordingly decided to dispatch an independent monitoring mission. The Arab observers started their mission in Syria in December 2011, but soon faced obstructions from the Syrian government and were impeded from effective monitoring activities. On January 22, 2012, a meeting of Arab foreign ministers decided to extend the observers' missions in Syria for another month; however, the Saudi foreign minister Su'ūd al-Fayṣal was reported to have announced the withdrawal of the Saudi mission immediately after the meeting (24). The GCC states then followed Saudi Arabia and withdrew their observers. The Arab League summarily declared on January 28, 2012 that they would suspend their mission. Thus, it could be said that Saudi Arabia exerted a powerful influence among the Arab states.

On February 4, 2012, the UN Security Council rejected the Arab League proposal on the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Russia and China exercised their veto. On February 12, 2012, a resolution to condemn human rights violations in Syria was passed in the UN General Assembly, which placed Russia and China in international isolation. However, these two members of the Security Council maintained their opposition against military intervention in Syria.

On February 12, an Arab League meeting held in Cairo adopted a resolution calling for a joint UN-Arab peacekeeping force in Syria. The Saudi Foreign Minister Su'ūd al-Fayṣal condemned the delay of the Arab League action, asking how much longer the League would remain mere onlookers and how much longer would they accept the Syrian regime (25). The Arab League sought UN

intervention in the Arab region for the second time, after their first request for a no-fly zone over Libya in March 2011.

The Arab League set a goal to realize the Syrian transition to institutional democracy and planned a schedule to this effect at the time they decided to extend their monitoring mission. In two weeks, Syrian opposition factions would rally, in two months a unified government would be formed, and in three months, a multiparty election for presidency would be held. Saudi Arabia had expressed expectations of Syrian reform since the summer of 2011. The Saudi decision to withdraw their observers meant the collapse of the schedule, though it would not have enough influence to change the course of the processes of other states in building democratic institutions. Saudi Arabia would just have to support Syrian institution building and approve the democratic regime once it was legitimized by international and indigenous powers. Saudi Arabia would be incapable of intervening in such an institutional process, as was demonstrated by examples of state building in, for example, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Instead, the Saudi government seemed rather to prefer to support the promotion of pro-Saudi politicians in other governments as a way of exerting their influence on decision-making processes.

The Arab League called for a joint UN-Arab peacekeeping force. However, preconditions for traditional peacekeeping operations (PKO) were not met at that moment, regardless of whether or not Russia and China had agreed to such operations in the UN Security Council; no cease-fire was in place, and none of the parties had given permission to implement PKO. NATO had judged that military intervention in Syria would not be possible, as the Syrian army would mobilize a significant number of soldiers, including an elite unit and those who had fought in the Lebanese civil war. Furthermore, the Syrian army possessed chemical weapons. Syrian geographical features indicated that military intervention would not be as simple as in the case of Libya.

It would seem that Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, would not have the capability to intervene in Syria. Egypt and Tunisia were said to prefer the diplomatic approach over military intervention. Those states neighboring Syria, namely, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon, were pointedly afraid of having their security affected by bringing Syria into civil war or by being involved in an international military intervention by themselves. Jordan did not join the Syrian sanctions in November 2011 because of its economic dependence on imports of European goods through Syria (26). However, the Arab League agreed with the idea of UN-Arab PKO, as it would be hard to mobilize the Arab army in any other way.

The international community rhetorically agreed to end the bloodshed in Syria, but it did not agree on any effective policy to stop the violence perpetrated by the Syrian government. The Syrian currency was severely devalued under the economic sanctions. It was reported in February 2012 that residents in severely bombed areas lacked basic services, food supplies, medical services, and had to queue for cooking gas and heating oil. The Syrian government has taken a tough stance given the lessons of the Lebanese civil war. They continue to try to maintain the regime's stability by cracking down on anti-regime movements through the relentless use of the police, army, and unofficial gangsters (Shabīḥa).

V Covert Support for the Armed Rebellion in Syria and Control of Islamic Solidarity in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi Arabian shift toward active diplomacy regarding the Syrian crisis was surprising; however, no Arab state has found any effective solution to end the humanitarian crisis. The Syrian crisis will last until the parties get tired of fighting or until a clear victor emerges. No Arab state has had a definite plan as to how to force the current Syrian regime to adopt a ceasefire. In May 2012, the Syrian government declared that the situation had become a war. The Asad regime is to be blamed for the occurrence of civil war, and the limitations of the UN Security

Council have been once more exposed.

Saudi Arabia has expressed its views on the “Syrian Friendship meeting” in February 2012, and the Geneva meeting, and Kofi Annan’s peace initiatives, insisting that any peace plans to compromise with the Asad regime will fail. In other words, Saudi Arabia has suggested that the fighting the Asad regime with arms is the only course to ending the bloodshed in Syria.

The Saudi Arabian government began to provide humanitarian aids for Syrian refugees. They provided them emergency camps in Turkey and dispatch relief convoys for them in Jordan. However, the focus is on the true picture of Saudi support to Syrian rebels. Saudi Foreign Minister Su’ūd al-Fayṣal stated on February 24, 2012 that the provision of arms to Syrian rebels was an excellent idea because they had to protect themselves (27). The Saudi ambassador to the UN then claimed on March 3, 2012 that the Asad regime had lost its legitimacy (28). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia announced in April 2012 that its government would provide funds to Syrian anti-government groups. Saudi Arabia permitted the latter to covertly purchase weapons with this money.

Numerous news reports have stated that Saudi Arabia planned to provide weapons to the Syrian anti-regime groups. However, the Saudi foreign minister denied this on April 10, 2012, stating that the Saudi government had not given “one single arm” to the Syrian opposition; he explained, “arming the opposition is a duty, except with weapons” (29). However, Syrian opposition activists purchased arms with funds supplied by the Gulf states in April 2012 (30).

Qatar called upon the international community to provide arms to Syrian rebels and announced its own intention to support the Syrian opposition by all means necessary, including the provision of weapons. It was reported on April 2 that Qatar and Saudi Arabia had agreed to provide funds to Syrian rebels. Turkey

ensured operational support. The Saudi government then held consultations with Arab governments and the U.S.. The U.S. representative, Senator Joseph Lieberman, was reported to have arranged the transfer of Saudi funds during his stay in Saudi Arabia (31). It was also reported that, in May 2012, the Saudi Arabian government made a decision to supply weapons to the Free Syrian Army through southern Turkey, and a *Guardian* correspondent confirmed this operation at a border station. CIA agents assisted the operation according to the report. The Free Syrian Army was reported to have received weapons from Gulf states via Turkey on June 13, 2012 (32).

Anti-regime groups in Syria could have obtained their weapons inside Syria from defectors or by stealing them from government warehouses (as happened in January 2012). It is not possible to confirm the exact smuggling route, though it seems likely that the funds and weapons were smuggled across the borders of Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq. After June 2012, Saudi Arabia and Qatar successfully formed operation group in Istanbul to coordinate arms delivery for Syrian rebels. In September, a Lebanese politician named Okab Sakr was reported as a Saudi Arabian hand who have brokered arms smuggles for Syrian rebels. Some weapons were allegedly transported to Jordan from Saudi Arabia, but they were probably provided to defend Jordan's borders. Financial transfers to Syria from the Gulf have also been reported in the media. These transfers were probably sent through the Syrian network from Syrian residents in the Gulf or the Qatari government (33). Saudi Arabia apparently turned a blind eye to all such transactions (despite its fervent denials in April). Meanwhile, the Syrian government had been receiving security consultations from Iran and weapons from Russia since 2011. The Syrian civil war turned into a complete proxy war.

On February 7, 2012, 107 Islamic scholars from Qatar, Egypt, Tunisia, Mauritania, Libya, Sudan, Kuwait, Yemen, Morocco, Bahrain, Germany, and Saudi Arabia declared a fatwa to prohibit Syrian security forces from murdering their citizens

and to encourage support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The 15 Saudis who signed the fatwa were non-governmental Islamic scholars. They were firmly in favor of supporting the FSA, whose ideological tendency was not fully confirmed as Islamic. During the course of the intensification of the Syrian civil war in spring 2012, Syrian jihadist groups started to join the battles, according to a report by Aron Lund. Those jihadist groups aimed to recruit their members exclusively from among Sunni Muslims. The civil war worsened in the spring of 2012, changing the character of the Syrian crisis to one further nuanced with sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Alawites in Syria. Some of the jihadists willingly participated in a joint struggle with the FSA or fought in the name of the FSA, hiding their true affiliation. Therefore, the anti-governmental front in Syria as of 2012 can roughly said to be composed of a loose unification of secular FSA and jihadist fighters. The explosion in the Syrian Defense Office in July 2012 was a suicide bombing, and is currently presumed to have been carried out by Syrian jihadists not associated with al-Qaida called the “Sayyed el-Shuhada brigade” (34).

On the domestic front, the Saudi Arabian government tried to control Islamic solidarity movements for charity to raise funds and prevent participants from joining battlefields in Syria. The government’s measures have been successful in controlling non-governmental Islamic activities in general as of September 2012, and dissenting views against the government have been driven “underground.” The Saudi Arabian government started to control charity activities to collect funds for Syrians in Saudi Arabia. It prohibited any non-governmental charity activities, even those arranged by Sheikh al- ‘Arīfī (35). The government began a National Fundraising Campaign for Syrians on July 23, 2012 (36), which raised SR467.79 million (U.S.\$124.73 million) by August 5.

Although the official stance of the Saudi government is that the Saudi Arabia was obliged to provide arms for the Syrian oppressed to protect themselves, the Saudi

deputy interior minister and senior Islamic scholars prohibited Saudi nationals from declaring jihad without the sanction of the authorities and warned Saudis against joining the fighting in Syria in June 2012. According to reports by September 2012, the participation of Saudi citizens in the Syrian civil war has been very limited. Saudi citizens' participation in foreign battles was said to have "decreased" in the Iraq war after 2003 in comparison with the Afghanistan civil war in 1980s, and again has been on a downward trend in the case of the Syrian war since the spring of 2012. After 2003's counterterrorism campaign effectively impressed upon Saudi nationals the negative aspects of joining battles abroad, Saudi citizens are more conscious of the risks to their personal careers and the encroachment of terrorism into their homeland.

Conclusion: International Competition to Expand Influence in Syria after the Asad Regime and Recommendations for Future Preventive Diplomacy in the Middle East

Egyptian President Muḥammad Mursī advocated the formation of a contact group composed of four "regional powers," namely, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, to discuss the Syrian crisis at an extraordinary summit of the OIC in August 2012. This proposal was a new regionally specified initiative after Kofi Annan's initiative—a meeting between the permanent members of the Security Council, Turkey, Qatar, Iraq, Kuwait, and the EU—could not arrive at a practical solution. The preparatory meeting of this contact group was held on September 11, at which Deputy Foreign Minister 'Abd al-Azīz bin 'Abdullāh represented Saudi Arabia, owing to the illness of FM Sūūd al-Fayṣal. Iran insisted on expanding the contact group to include Venezuela and Iraq at the meeting. At the first high-level meeting held on September 17, Saudi Arabia did not send a representative. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Dautglu said that Saudi Arabia would participate in future meetings, but Saudi Arabia remained silent on the matter. Saudi Arabia was presumed to have doubted its effectiveness at the moment of the Egyptian proposal, owing to the suggestion to include Iranian participation, and

participated in the preparatory meeting only for the sake of friendship with Egypt. Egypt seemed to have made such a proposal with the intention of resuming its past diplomatic influence in the region.

The 'Abdullāh statement was issued after Riyāḍ Mūsā al-Asāad, a Syrian general defected and declared the Free Syrian Army on July 29, 2011. Since the 1960s, Saudi Arabian leaders have experienced turmoils in the Middle East. However, it is hard to conjecture if the Saudis predicted civil war as a worst-case scenario during the course of events in Syria at the moment of issuing the 'Abdullāh statement. The Saudi government failed regarding the UN Security Council resolution, but successfully led a hard-line anti-Syrian coalition and indirectly armed Syrian anti-government groups. The interim result of the 'Abdullāh statement was the instigation of civil war in Syria. Syrian anti-regime groups, both FSA and jihadists alike, began to use their weapons not only for their own defense, but also to attack the Syrian government and security forces.

No one can predict who will be the winner of this civil war, and any number of unexpected scenarios can unfold in the future; Syria may disintegrate, or fighting may drag on for several years. However, it seems certain that Sunni political groups will gain larger influence in Syria. The global powers, such as the U.S., Russia, and France, are regarded to be actively involved in the Syrian crisis for the purpose of competing against rivals and gaining larger influence in Syria and the Middle East. The US can opt for military intervention with less domestic political risk if president Obama wins the presidential election in 2012 and begins his second term, judging by the case of NATO bombings in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995. US President Bill Clinton agreed to bombing missions in Serbia during his second term.

Iran will still maintain its regional power whatever the result of the Syrian civil war, since the Iranian network in Iraq, the capability to strike the Gulf countries,

the ability to wage asymmetric war on global fronts, and Iran's long-range missiles will not be affected by the Syrian civil war. Syrian asymmetric capability is negligible outside Syria and Lebanon. However, Iran and its Shia factions still can threaten their shared opponents in the region. In August 15, 2012, al-Meqdad, a Shia armed group, kidnapped 20 Sunni Muslims in Lebanon. The Saudi Arabian government issued a warning to its citizens to refrain from visiting and staying in Lebanon. Saudis probably regarded the incident as retaliation by the "Shia bloc" for the attacks by the "Sunni bloc" against the Syrian government. The Saudis affirmed the risk to openly support Syrian anti-government movements.

King 'Abdullāh invited Iranian president Ahmadinezhād to participate in an extraordinary summit of the OIC held on August 14-16, 2012 in Makkat al-Mukarramah. He advocated the creation of a dialogue center to promote harmony among the different sects of Islam at the final communiqué. The outcome of the 3-day meeting was deemed insignificant by political analysts, however: a kind of symbolic statement, since the OIC does not furnish the sort of institutional action tools needed to solve armed conflicts. Nevertheless, it can be confirmed that Saudi Arabia succeeded in formalizing a consensus among most of the Muslim states and also maintaining communications with the Iranian regime. From the perspective of conflict prevention, a policy to promote harmony among different sects of Islam in Syria has been urgently needed since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in March 2011. It is regrettable that Saudi Arabia could not launch dialogues to ease the anxiety within the minorities in Syria including Christians, Kurds, Druze and Alawi sect to promote a peaceful transition of power in Syria before the civil war had broken out.

What will be the lessons learned by the entire Middle East from the failure to prevent civil war in Syria? What will the Syrian civil war portend for the Middle Eastern policy of Japan? The politics and commitment by the regional states, regional organizations, and major powers are changing since the "Arab Spring,"

and new trends are appearing in the case of the Syrian crisis. Most of the commitments to solve the Syrian crisis have been sought in uncertainty and the policies implemented have been ad hoc in nature. The systematic improvement of the preventive diplomacy capacities of all the actors and stakeholders in the Middle East is recommended.

The new role that Saudi Arabia attempted to play marked a significant change. Saudi Arabia showed that it could lead the Arab states in criticizing Syrian repression and influencing the Arab League. Saudi Arabia began to commit to the Syrian crisis for the purpose of maintaining their domestic legitimacy, but it is expected that they will continue to search for a fair role in conflict prevention and improving multilateralism in Middle Eastern politics. The US has expected Saudi Arabia to play a greater role in the Islamic world in mediating between major powers and Muslim states. Japan may be able to cooperate with Saudi Arabia and other states to find measures to strengthen the institutions and policies of the Arab League and OIC for conflict prevention. The United Nation could be the appropriate stage for negotiations for this purpose.

The commitment of the Arab League and the OIC are also shifting after the “Arab Spring”. The Arab League and the OIC had traditionally been known for their functional deficits in conflict solution and prevention, however, the Arab League resolution for Syrian sanctions and the OIC proposal encouraging religious dialogue were fresh approaches. Since armed conflicts have broken out repeatedly after September 11 in the Middle East, and the severe and large-scale war typified by the Syrian crisis threatens the stability of the entire Middle East, it is an appropriate time to strengthen the functions of regional organizations for conflict resolution.

International commitments to bring about ceasefire in Syria have faced limitations. The entire international community failed to respond swiftly during the initial

stage of the Syrian crisis. The Syrian sanctions have been enforced by each of the participating states and the Arab League, but a condemnation of both Russia and Iran, for supplying weapons to the Syrian regime, has not yet been passed by the UN Security Council.

The major powers of the West, including the U.S., have been inclined toward a policy of selective commitment in the Middle East and have not opted for military intervention in Syria. Part of the reason for this is that the UN Security Council failed to adopt a resolution sanctioning intervention, and military operations in Syria were judged insufficient to prevent armed conflicts owing to the strategic environment. The major powers and NATO expanded their involvement in the Middle East and Africa after September 11, but owing to the world economic crisis after 2008 and the unrest in Afghanistan, they have tended to be much more cautious in their military commitments. It will be a new task to prevent the occurrence of fresh armed conflicts given this international circumstance.

The shift in the U.S. policy toward selective commitment was made clear by the Obama doctrine announced during the Libyan war in 2011 and the U.S. commitments in the case of the Syrian crisis. The U.S. declared that it would supply “no lethal” tools to Syrian anti-government groups in 2012, which may mean that it will provide satellite intelligence to follow Syrian troops. However, the media carried stories that the CIA supported the arms supply on the Turkish-Syrian border and the true picture of the U.S.’s commitments in Syria has not yet been clarified. The Middle East will remain unstable if the U.S. adopts the wrong policies. Japan has to take risk in East Asia if the U.S. Army becomes too deeply involved in the Middle East and exhausts its reserves on its Asian strategy. The U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton declared an American “strategic turn to the Asia-Pacific region” which is presumed to become a more distinct possibility after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan (37).

The delayed reaction to the Syrian crisis by the Arab states worsened the situation during the initial stages of the conflict immediately after March 2011. Syria, Iran, and Russia are to be blamed for using arms to suppress the demonstrations and to destroy the cities and villages. The supply of weapons to anti-Syrian groups by Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia has not been criticized by the West, but this action fueled the civil war and intensified the armed struggle. The cost of the civil war will be expensive. More sophisticated techniques of preventive diplomacy have to be developed to counter repression and cease conflicts without resorting to force in the Middle East.

Multilateral attempts to solve the Syrian crisis have failed, among them the Geneva conference organized by Kofi Anan and the contact group proposed by Egypt. The lack of an institutional framework for this urgent situation is problematic from the standpoint of negotiating and ensuring conflict prevention. It is recommended that more countries in the international community, especially the Middle East, improve their capabilities for preventive diplomacy; that is, the capabilities of intelligence gathering, analysis, giving early warning, and initiating diplomatic activities to look for alternative actions during the conflict mediation process among the parties involved in the conflict, stakeholders, and regional organizations. The establishment of institutionalized dialogue among Religions, sects, and ethnic groups in the Middle East will also be a major means of preventing future conflicts in the Middle East.

The first statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan on the Syrian crisis, dating from March 23, 2011, clarified the position of the Japanese government and called upon the Government of Syria to respond in a restrained manner to peaceful demonstrations, without resorting to violence. The Japanese government would soon encourage political reforms in Syria (Statement by MOFA, Japan on Clashes between Demonstrators and Security Forces in Syria on April 13, 2011). Several months later, the government would take an even firmer stand, saying that

“Japan believes Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad has already lost the trust of the international community, can no longer legitimately govern the country and should step aside,” according to a statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs on August 19, 2011.

Japan announced an emergency grant aid of U.S. \$ 3 million in February 2012, and extended another U.S. \$ 5 million in aid to support Syrian refugees on August 24, 2012. Japan has fulfilled its responsibility to carry out its international obligation to stabilize the region by assisting the Middle East peace process, dispatching UNIDOF troops, and contributing to the prevention of the proliferation of WMD since the 1990s. Japan has successfully maintained these policies after the Syrian crisis broke out in March 2011. The Japanese government has continued to station Japanese security forces to UNIDOF after the Syrian crisis. The latest extension was approved by the cabinet on August 7, 2012. However, the cabinet of Japan decided to withdraw personnel engaged in UNDOF and completion of transportation and other activities in the Golan Heights on December 21, 2012. The situation in Golan Heights had deteriorated since November 2012. Syrian tanks entered the demilitarized zone in the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria on November 3, and mortar bombs fired from Syrian side landed in Israel village on November 8, saying that Syrian rebels fled to the area. Israel fired shells to Syrian side on November 11, for the first time in 39 years, followed by counterattack from Syrian side on November 12. Israeli soldiers fired tank shells to Syrian side on the following day. Syrian shut mortar bombs on November 25 again. Two Australian soldiers of UNIDOF were injured while their convoy was traveling to Damascus airport on November 29. They could not specify who shot out them were government soldiers or rebels. The decision of Japanese cabinet to withdraw Golan mission was based on coordination with the United Nations (UN).

Japan will not take diplomatic action unilaterally in terms of providing conflict resolutions in the Middle East, nor commit policies to supply weapons to anti-governmental forces. Therefore, it is recommended that Japan focus on crafting policies to establish preventive diplomacy in the Middle East with Middle Eastern officials and intellectuals in the long term. Japan will be able to assist the regional states, the Arab League, and the OIC to improve their policies and functions for preventive diplomacy. Japan can stimulate academic research to propose new ideas and furnish adequate policy options for preventive diplomacy to the regional states and organizations. Multiculturalism may be the solution for ethnic and sectarian rivalries. Supplying ideas may be more valuable and effective than providing funding and weapons to improve options for conflict prevention. Second-track diplomacy will be a safe course for Japan to pursue.

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