

**A new Saudi Strategy in Syria?  
Al Mamluk visit and its implications**

**Policy Brief**

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The situation in Syria is witnessing diplomatic and military breakthroughs of previous taboos. It was interesting, at the political level, the Saudi announcement of the Syrian intelligence officer Ali Mamlouk's visit to Saudi Arabia meeting Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Jeddah. The revelation came after the leak by the pro Hezbollah newspaper Al Akhbar that coincided with the visits by Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem to Russia, Iran and Oman.<sup>1</sup> This visit was followed by major questions regarding the Saudi future role in Syria: Did the Saudis change their stance toward Syria's future? Do they accept Bachar El Assad's leadership for an interim Syrian government following a political settlement? Will the Syrian regime be included in a strategy for an anti-terrorism alliance?

Russian's efforts to forge an anti-ISIS alliance that would include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria enhanced the political discussions over a post- al Assad government. As Russia hopes, the anti-ISIS platform may facilitate negotiations between Assad and his opponents about a power-sharing agreement in Damascus<sup>2</sup>. KSA, as a key player in the Syrian crisis and a supporter for the Syrian opposition, is a necessary partner for Russia in this alliance sharing ISIS threat. A Saudi-Russian rapprochement followed the nuclear deal struck between Iran and six world powers was clear with a historical visit by Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammed bin Salman to St. Petersburg where he signed several agreements with the Russians concerning cooperation on oil, space and peaceful nuclear energy.<sup>3</sup> As several sources claimed, the visit discussed the Syrian situation and prepared the ground for future discussions and cooperation including the Syrian crisis<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Kanso, W (2015), Al Akhbar, retrieved from: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/238963>

<sup>2</sup> Stratfor (2015), Riyadh and Damascus Hold a Quiet Dialogue, retrieved from: <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/riyadh-and-damsuc-hold-quiet-dialogue>

<sup>3</sup> Riedel, B (2015), Saudi deputy crown prince seeks Russia deals, Al Monitor, retrieved from: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/saudi-crown-prince-russia-deals.html#>

<sup>4</sup> Riedel, B (2015), Saudi's star prince keeps rising visits Putin in St. Petersburg, Brooking, retrieved from: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/06/19-saudi-arabia-russia-mohammad-bin-salman-putin>

Following that meeting, Syrian National Security Bureau chief Gen Ali Mamluk made a quiet visit to KSA and met Bin Salman. Pro-Iranian media interpretations indicated that this visit marked a change in Saudi stance toward the Syrian regime headed by Bashar by considering him part of the anti-Islamic state coalition. These interpretations contradict the latest developments occurring in Syria where Bashar El Assad is facing KSA supported battlefield setbacks. Assad lately acknowledged that the Syrian military would be obliged to withdraw from certain areas. The rebel militias' moves toward the Alwaite regions have increased the danger situation for the regime adding to it the Turkish effort to create a safe zone in Northern Syria.<sup>5</sup> Saudi Arabian foreign minister Adel Al Jubeir press conferences clarifies that the Saudi position in Syria will remain the same by stressing that Al Assad cannot be part of a political solution in Syria<sup>6</sup>. Mamlouk's visit to Saudi Arabia emphasizes Riyadh's hope to be seen as a constructive partner in Moscow's diplomatic efforts. In addition, Saudi invitation to Mamluk marks that Riyadh alongside USA, Russia and several Middle Eastern powers are still worried about the post-Assad Syria fearing a deeper collapse of the country that could strengthen ISIS and other extremist groups, and thus it would seek a political solution between the different groups in the future to fight ISIS.<sup>7</sup> Jubeir affirmed this idea by indicating in an important statement that the Syrian army should be protected as a future partner in the war against terrorism in Syria.<sup>8</sup>

A political solution in Syria will remain far as long as the Iranian regime isn't an essential part in the negotiations. According to foreign policy journal, Syrian army and intelligence officials have

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<sup>5</sup> Bowen, A and Mcinnis, M, The Saudi-Syrian Back Channel to End the War, Foreign policy, retrieved from: [http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/17/the-saudi-syrian-back-channel-to-end-the-war-iran/?utm\\_content=buffer75200&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_campaign=buffer](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/17/the-saudi-syrian-back-channel-to-end-the-war-iran/?utm_content=buffer75200&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

<sup>6</sup> Mojahedin.org (2015), Saudi FM Adel al-Jubeir: Assad has no place in Syria's future, retrieved from: [www.mojahedin.org/newsen/37156/Saudi-FM-Adel-al-Jubeir-Assad-has-no-place-in-Syria's-future](http://www.mojahedin.org/newsen/37156/Saudi-FM-Adel-al-Jubeir-Assad-has-no-place-in-Syria's-future)

<sup>7</sup> Barnard, A (2015), New Diplomacy Seen on US-Russian Efforts to End Syrian Civil War, NY Times, retrieved from: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/12/world/middleeast/new-diplomacy-seen-on-us-russian-efforts-to-end-syrian-civil-war.html?smid=tw-share&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/12/world/middleeast/new-diplomacy-seen-on-us-russian-efforts-to-end-syrian-civil-war.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0)

<sup>8</sup> Arab News (2015), Assad not part of Syria solution, retrieved from: <http://www.arabnews.com/news/789771>,

expressed growing unease with the dominance of Iran over the Syrian state. It is impossible for Assad who is totally dependent on Iran to take a major decision without their agreement. Tehran announced an initiative to resolve the Syrian crisis that preserves its interests with providing some concessions to the GCC countries, but it remains far from the Saudi demands expressed to Mamluk in their meeting in Jedda.<sup>9</sup>

Moving to the regional spectrum, the Saudis have succeeded so far to overcome their Iranian opponents in several regional files as their allies' forces in Yemen have succeeded militarily to recover many southern provinces from Houthis.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Riyadh improved its relations with Hamas<sup>11</sup> and with the Sudanese state; not to mention the Iraqi developments affecting negatively Iranian allies in Baghdad. These developments may alter the continued progress of the Saudi position in Syria and stick to the terms of the solution that suits them, especially the formation of a transitional body in Syria dismissing any role for Bashar Al Assad; in addition to the withdrawal of Iranian backed militias from Syria. On the other hand, Riyadh will make sure to continue its negotiations through the Russian and Omani channels to safeguard that any solution will protect the Syrian institutions (including the Syrian army) as a future tool for their fight against terrorism. Saudi Arabia's diplomacy in Syria was best described by Al Arab journalist Jamal Khashoggi stating in an interview to Al Masr el Yawm, that the two key elements of Riyadh's diplomacy are protecting the region from further meltdowns that led to terrorism and to diminish the Iranian role in the region.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bowen, A and Mcinnis, M, The Saudi-Syrian Back Channel to End the War, Foreign policy, retrieved from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/17/the-saudi-syrian-back-channel-to-end-the-war->

<sup>10</sup> Stratfor (2015), The Saud-Led Coalition Exploits Success, retrieved from: <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/saudi-led-coalition-exploits-success>

<sup>11</sup> Jabbour, R. (2015), Reconciling Hamas and Egypt: A new Saudi Foreign Policy Strategy, MEIRSS, retrieved from: <http://meirss.org>

<sup>12</sup> Majdi, F (2015), Khashoggi: The Saudi Support to Egypt is over, almasryoon, August 16, retrieved from: <http://almasryoon.com>