

# Will He Break Bread with the Wahhabis To Pursue Regime Change in Syria?

by Ramtanu Maitra and Jeffrey Steinberg

Feb. 24—President Obama's scheduled visit to Saudi Arabia at the end of March may be aimed at cementing the Washington-Riyadh resolve to widen the military involvement to remove the Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad. All indicators suggest that the U.S. President is preparing to join hands with the jihadi-financing Wahhabi Keeper of Two Holy Mosques, Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. The outcome of such an alliance could set the stage for even greater bloodshed in the already devastated region.

According to a senior U.S. intelligence official, the Saudis are attempting to create the impression that they are once again "aligned with Washington," to pave the way for King Abdullah to make a strong pitch for regime change in Syria when Obama meets with him next month. According to the source, the Saudis are promoting the idea of merging the Riyadh-backed "moderate" Islamist fighters with the secularist Free Syrian Army, to wage war on both the Assad regime, and on the hardcore terrorists of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the al-Nusra Front.

It is anyone's guess, considering the deceptive nature of the Saudi royal household, exhibited since 1979 in particular, whether Riyadh will indeed back the "moderates" in Syria against the hardcore Sunni Wahhabi-Salafi terrorists. It has been well established over the years that the Saudis are financing and arming hundreds of thousands of terrorists, mouthing the Wahhabi version of Islam—from Russia's Chechnya in the north, to Syria and Lebanon, to Africa—to use all possible violent means to undermine the Shi'a-majority Iran's influence in the Islamic world, and, at the same time, to serve the Kingdom's British and other imperialist allies' geopolitical interests. It is evident that the Obama Administration is getting ready to bring the United States further into that alliance.

## Thousands of Jihadi Terrorists

There are also indications that the Saudis are angling to get Washington's approval. Since the "regime-change" operation in Damascus received the green light from Britain, France, the United States, et al., with the purpose of weakening the influence of Iran and Russia in Syria, thousands of Saudi terrorists, armed and trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan, have moved into Syria. The Saudi government admits that more than 1,000 jihadis have left the country to join the conflict in Syria, but Western intelligence sources in contact with the Kingdom say that the figure could be closer to 3,000, the London *Times* newspaper wrote recently.

In fact, there were reports of a number of "migrants," including Saudis, in Syria as the Ahrar al-Sham movement was emerging, around May 2011. Last December, the *Long War Journal* reported that the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement announced that it, in conjunction with al-Nusra and ISIS, had targeted "the headquarters of [Hezbollah] and Abu al Fadhil al 'Abbas," a pro-government Syrian Shi'a militia, in the Sayyidah Zaynab and Hujayra farms area near Damascus. That indicates that the very same al-Nusra Front and ISIS that the Saudis are reportedly planning to wage war against, were in fact their creation.

The world came to know of all this, and the Saudis, of course, were aware that the world is aware of the presence of thousands of Saudi terrorists inside Syria, and of its financing for dozens of terrorist outfits operating in Syria.

## Dumping Geneva

So, to put on a peace-loving face, Riyadh has applied a thick layer of cosmetics. In early February, the Saudi king outlawed travel abroad by Saudi citizens intending to join jihadist movements, threatening 20-year jail terms for violation of his decree, the *Washington*



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*National Security Advisor Susan Rice (above) has recently held a number of secret meetings in Washington with Middle East spy chiefs, among whom was Saudi Interior Minister Prince Mohammad bin-Nayef (left).*

*Post* reported. This charade is deemed necessary to create the atmosphere for the official reunion between Riyadh and Washington, to re-energize their efforts to remove Bashar al-Assad.

In addition to the strength of the well-financed Saudi lobby in Washington, Saudi Arabia's large purchases of weapons from the United States, and its alliance with the powerful political lobby AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) against Iran, the Saudis, like the Obama Administration, have in essence trashed the Geneva talks aimed at bringing the Syrian crisis to an end, which ended in mid-February. Washington and London called them an abysmal failure, while Moscow made clear that a conflict that has taken 100,000-plus lives, over almost three years, cannot be resolved by two rounds of talks. Surely it needs more negotiations. It is clear that London, Paris, Washington, and Riyadh want regime change, and nothing less.

So, the stage is being set up. David Ignatius reported in the Feb. 18 *Washington Post* that recently a number of Middle East spy chiefs were in Washington for secret meetings on the Syria situation with National Security Advisor Susan Rice. The key visitor was Prince Mohammed bin-Nayef, the Saudi Minister of Interior who has now replaced the ailing Prince Bandar bin Sultan as the chief of the Saudi covert operations program in Syria.

Also, a two-day (Feb. 15-16) meeting took place in Gaziantep, Turkey, near the Syrian border, of 30 leaders of the Free Syrian Army who make up the Supreme Military Command. The meeting, coordinated with the

events in Washington, reorganized the military command of the FSA, replacing Gen. Salim Idriss with Abdul-Allah al-Bashir. Al-Bashir, who defected from the Syrian Army in 2013, is based in Quneitra in the south of Syria. His deputy is Col. Haitham Afiseh, from Idlib province in the north. The two commanders, according to Ignatius, are working closely with the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, headed by Jamal Maarouf. Maarouf met last week inside Syria with Ahmad al-Jarba, the Saudi-backed head of the Syrian opposition coalition.

According to a report in the *Washington Post* on Feb. 19, Idriss was ousted because of his close ties to Qatar. Al-Bashir is Saudi-backed, as is the opposition's "Minister of Defense," Assad Mustafa. Mustafa, a former Minister of Agriculture in the Assad government, who retired to Kuwait, joined the opposition last year, and is now in charge of coordinating the arms flows to the rebels. Press TV reported Feb. 20 that Saudi Arabia is now preparing to provide more than 3,000 tons of heavy arms to the FSA. "Idriss was identified as someone we could not work with, and we made the strategic decision to suspend all support to the Free Syrian Army until it changed its leadership," Saudi Arabia's diplomatic liaison to the FSA told the news service DPA. "Now we can resume arms supplies in full and as fast as possible," said the official, who did not wish to be named, because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

The Kingdom had reportedly suspended its military aid to the FSA in November 2013 to protest the way that Idriss had distributed arms from Western countries and Persian Gulf Arab states. The military coalition, which was established in 2011 to operate against the Syrian government, has been weakened by the deep divisions among its members, and its failure to make major gains, Press TV reported.

### **Bandar Sidelined?**

On Feb. 19, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that, according to "Saudi royal advisers," Prince Bandar has

been replaced as head of the Syria covert war effort by Prince bin-Nayef and Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, the latter a of King Abdullah and the head of the Saudi National Guard. The *Journal* reported that Prince bin-Nayef is close to both Secretary of State John Kerry and CIA Director John Brennan, who first met bin-Nayef in 1999, when he was completing his tour as CIA station chief in Saudi Arabia.

Sidelining Bandar, if this report is indeed true, and introducing bin-Nayef as “close to both Kerry and Brennan,” may provide reassurance to the credulous, but the fact remains that the policy in Riyadh is still intact: backing the Wahhabi terrorists to undermine Iran, Russia, India, China, and the Islamic states, and a regime change in Syria by the most violent means.

This is why:

While it is true that Geneva II did not accomplish much, had efforts of the UN and Arab League’s special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi to get the parties to agree on humanitarian relief succeeded, the two sides might have held together. Residents in the old city of Homs and in the Palestinian neighborhood of Yarmouk in Damascus have been under siege for two years. It was hoped that safe passage could be provided for food and medicine, but this was not accomplished. The UN convoy came under sniper attack, according to Vijay Prashad in *The Hindu* Feb. 17. This sabotage of the Geneva II talks has been enabled by those who identify the terrorists as “rebels” and “activists,” and provide them with arms and cash.

What the world knows, but conveniently ignores, in order to allow the so-called “free world” to project itself as the champion of democracy, is that the terrorists were created by those very champions of democracy, funded by the Saudis, to undermine the erstwhile Soviet Union in the 1980s.

The terrorists were never eliminated because they are the foot-soldiers in the regime-change army, which is hurled against those whom the West does not like. They were used in Libya, and the world knows how much good that did for the Libyans. they were also used in Chechnya in Russia, Xinjiang province in China, and Jammu and Kashmir in the Indian subcontinent, to name a few.

As the *Hindu* article pointed out: “Al-Qaeda was not demolished in Kandahar and Tora Bora. Its hardened cadre slipped across to Pakistan and then onwards to their homelands. There they regrouped, reviving the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, al-Qaeda in Yemen,

Ansar al-Sharia, Ansar Dine, and ISIS. The latter slipped into Syria from an Iraq broken by the U.S. occupation and the sectarian governance of the current government. There they worked with Jabhat al-Nusra and fought alongside other Islamist currents such as Ahrar al-Sham. It was inevitable that these battle-tested Islamists would overrun the peaceful protesters and the defectors from the Syrian Army—the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—who scattered to the wind in 2012.”

### **Israeli Help, and Arms**

According to Franklin Lamb, visiting Professor of International Law at Damascus University, Susan Rice, in addition to her meetings with the Middle East spy chiefs reported by Ignatius in the *Washington Post*, met with Israeli National Security Advisor Gen. Yaakov Amidror, to discuss Syria, in August 2013. Israel, moreover, according to a Congressional source, has offered to help “behind the scenes” with airbases if needed, and with certain activities along the southern Syrian border with still-occupied Palestine.

A majority of Arab League countries, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), plus Turkey, France, the UK, and some members of the EU, also support the No Fly Zone (NFZ) idea for Syria. Saudi Arabia has already approved large quantities of Chinese man-portable air-defense systems or Manpads, as well as anti-tank guided missiles from Russia, and more cash to help rebels oust Assad, according to an Arab diplomat. Meanwhile, the U.S. has upped its contribution to pay the salaries of preferred rebel fighters, reported *Al Manar* Feb. 22.

On Feb. 4, a U.S. Air Force plane, loaded with weapons for Syria militants, arrived in the Jordanian town of Al-Mafraq, where the U.S. has maintained a presence, with its Special Forces and CIA operatives, since 2011. The arrival of the weapons, reported by Jordanian media, came only days after it was reported that the U.S. Congress had quietly approved arms shipments to Syria militants to help them topple the government. Jordan will be providing facilities to store the weapons before they are delivered to rebels in Syria, one news report said.

According to the Jordanian *al-Waha* news, a new batch of 1,500 gunmen have completed training in a center there for fighting in Syria, and are now ready to join thousands of other foreign-backed militants in the war-torn country. The weaponry, including a variety of small arms, as well as some more powerful weapons, such as anti-tank rockets, are flowing in to the so-called

moderate militants fighting in the south of the country. As expected, the Obama Administration claims these weapons are sent for “moderate” militants.

On Feb. 14, Jordan’s King Abdullah flew to Sunny-side, Calif., to talk to President Obama. The White House emphasized that the king was not there to play golf, but to discuss handling of the civil war in Syria. “Jordan is an invaluable ally and close friend of the United States,” National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan said. What Meehan did not say is that Jordan could be the jump-off point in case the NFZ on Syria is finally imposed.

### The Saudi-Pakistan Connection

On Feb. 15, Saudi Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz took a 300-plus-person delegation to Pakistan. What emerged from his talks is that the Saudis want Pakistan to provide anti-aircraft and anti-tank rockets to Syrian rebels, a Saudi source told the Pakistani media on Feb 16.

Pakistan makes its own version of Chinese shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles, known as Anza, and anti-tank rockets. Anza I, Anza II, and Anza III, which is now under development, are variations of Chinese

Hongjian-8 and 9. The HJ-8 has been produced under license by Kahuta Research Laboratories in Pakistan since the late 1990s.

Earlier this month, Pakistan’s Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Raheel Sharif, visited Riyadh and met Prince Salman. General Sharif was appointed to his post by Pakistani Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif.

Nawaz Sharif owes his position to the Saudis. He was facing life imprisonment in a case orchestrated by Pakistan’s then-President Musharraf. The Saudis forced Musharraf into accepting a deal whereby Nawaz Sharif would be released by Musharraf, on the condition that he and his family would live in exile in Saudi Arabia for a ten-year period. On Dec. 9, 2000, Sharif and his family left for Jeddah on a royal Saudi plane. He returned in 2007, and was elected President in 2013. Now, it is payback time, and Sharif and the Pakistani military will do anything to please the Saudi royal household.

Breitbart.com reported last week that Saudi Arabia has asked Pakistan to dispatch 30,000 troops to the Kingdom as part of a bilateral defense agreement that’s currently being formulated in a flurry of meetings between defense and military officials from the two countries. Prime Minister Sharif said: “In view of current challenges, there is a need to further strengthen defense cooperation between the two countries and a new era of strategic relationship needs to start.”

In addition, there were reports, including in the *Washington Times* Nov. 7, 2013, that the Saudis are seeking nuclear weapons from Pakistan. Ynet News said that Saudi Arabia has been investing large amounts of money in Pakistan’s nuclear-weapons development program for some time, and that Saudi officials may have the ability to deploy nuclear weapons faster than Iran could.

Such are the indications that the Saudis are preparing for a violent end to the Syrian regime; this is the background to the upcoming meeting between President Obama and Saudi King Abdullah.

According to Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow and director of the Brookings Intelligence Project, and a senior advisor to the last four U.S. Presidents on South Asia and the Middle East, King Abdullah will make a push for a more vigorous American effort to oust Assad when he hosts Obama. The Saudis have been openly disappointed that Obama has not used force to get rid of Assad, or provided more assistance to training and arming the Syrian opposition. The King hopes to disarm American concerns that the Kingdom is helping terrorists gain a stronghold in Syria.

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