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independence in 1971. The next day protesters camped outside the Financial District.

Encouraged by the events in Bahrain, and calls by non-establishment clerics in Saudi Arabia, the Shias in Qatif demonstrated on 24 February to demand the release of Shias detained without charge since the 1996 Al Khobar bombing. Three days later almost 3,000 local Shias put their names down on three petitions separately calling for a constitutional monarchy, an elected parliament with full legislative authority, and a revision of the Basic Law.<sup>23</sup> This was enough to alarm the authorities in Riyadh who, like their counterparts in Manama, blamed the pro-democracy demonstrations on a “foreign country,” a thinly disguised reference to Iran.

Two days earlier, in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, after Friday prayers hundreds of Shia protesters, waving the flags of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, marched in Qatif, Safwa, Awamiyah, and other places, demanding the release of the “forgotten prisoners”. Many Shia activists stressed that these demonstrations were independent of the Day of Rage announced anonymously on social media elsewhere in the Kingdom. All the same, the protesters were disbanded by the security forces armed with Sten guns.<sup>24</sup> Evidently, the unrest in Bahrain was impacting on the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

On 8 March, three hard-line Shia groups called for the abolition of the monarchy and founding of a democratic republic through peaceful means. Three days later their supporters’ march to the Royal Court in Riffa, the second largest city, was blocked by the security forces, while tens of thousands participated in an Al Wefaq procession in Manama. The government repeated its claim that Iran was behind the non-violent uprising but provided no evidence. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Saudi regime urged King Hamad to use maximum force to crush the demand for a democratic government under a constitutional monarchy, fearing that the contagion of democracy would infect the Eastern Province, threatening the future of the House of Saud. Yielding to its urgings, King Hamad appealed to the GCC for help on 13 March, the day its riot police deployed tear gas and rubber bullets to remove protesters from the Pearl Roundabout and the Financial District.

The next day the GCC contrived to send troops to Bahrain under the aegis of the Peninsula Shield Force, set up to assist the member-

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states against external aggression. Instantly, Riyadh provided 1,000 soldiers mounted on armored personnel carriers for the mission. These troops entered Bahrain from the Saudi mainland via the causeway, to be followed later by token contingents from the UAE and Kuwait, ostensibly “to secure key installations” in the island kingdom. To ensure that the Bahraini protesters got the message, a Saudi official declared that “This is the initial phase. Bahrain will get whatever assistance it needs. It’s open-ended.” On the other side, the statement issued by Bahrain’s opposition groups said that “We consider the entry of any soldier or military machinery into the Kingdom of Bahrain’s air, sea or land territories a blatant occupation.”<sup>25</sup> Setting aside partisan interpretations, it was indisputable that this intervention marked the first time that an Arab government requested and received foreign military help during the Arab Spring.

In Iran, President Ahmadinejad equated the Saudis’ military move with Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 which would later lead to his downfall. Appearing on state television, he said, “What has happened [in Bahrain] is bad, unjustifiable and irreparable,” and added that “The people’s demands for change must be respected.”<sup>26</sup>

Backed by the armored Saudi troops, King Hamad declared a state of emergency. While thousands marched to the Saudi embassy in Manama protesting the GCC intervention, clashes occurred between gun-toting Bahraini soldiers and demonstrators. On the morning of 16 March, Bahrain’s troops and riot police, backed by tanks and helicopters, advanced behind clouds of tear gas, and set alight the protesters’ white tents in Pearl Roundabout amidst thickening black smoke. Three protesters were killed and hundreds injured by live ammunition and rubber bullets. The authorities imposed a 4pm to 4am curfew in most of the country and jammed mobile phones as soldiers entered Shia villages outside Manama.<sup>27</sup> The ongoing crackdown included the arrest of more than 1,000 protesters, including seven opposition leaders.

During the month-long uprising King Hamad remained confident that the Obama administration would do nothing more than hand-wringing, combined with words of caution and the need to temporise. Little wonder, then, that when Jeffrey Feltman, the US Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East, arrived in Manama on 14 March with a mandate to mediate between the two sides, he found it hard to

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meet with government officials, let alone persuade them to negotiate with the opposition.<sup>28</sup> The salient fact was that the regional strategy of the Pentagon rested on its retaining Manama as its naval base. Since 1971, the rulers of Bahrain had extended the use of Manama's docks to the Pentagon under several contracts and titles. In 1995, following the US Navy's re-launching of its Fifth Fleet after fifty-eight years it chose the Naval Support Activity Bahrain in Manama as its base.<sup>29</sup> Given these factors, and Bahrain's physical link to the Saudi Kingdom, it was almost inevitable that the will of the House of Saud would prevail in the Sunni-ruled island, and award Riyadh a clear victory over Tehran.

However a far weightier and longer battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran was in the offing in Syria.

### *A Protracted Battle for Syria*

It was the events in Syria's southern town of Deraa near the Jordanian border that caught the imagination of protesters nationally. On 6 March 2011 the local police arrested fifteen teenage pupils for spraying on their school walls the slogan they had seen on their television screens: "The people want the downfall of the regime (Arabic: *As Shaab Yoreed Eskaat al Nizam!*)!" They were tortured in detention. On 15 March their families and others marched to demand their release. Three days later confrontation escalated after Friday prayers outside the Omari Mosque when security forces used water cannons and tear gas, followed by live fire, killing four people, to disperse the crowd.<sup>30</sup> This event would soon inspire anti-regime demonstrators elsewhere to chant the slogan, "With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, O Deraa."

On 20 March angry crowds in Deraa set alight the offices of the ruling Baath Party, and demanded the release of political prisoners as well as an end to the Emergency Law imposed by Baathist leaders after seizing power in 1963. President Bashar Assad, a member of the minority Alawi sub-sect within Shia Islam, dispatched senior officials to Deraa to reassure the local tribal chiefs that he was committed to bringing to justice those who had opened fire. He sacked the local governor and security chief, and ordered the release of the detained students. The tell-tale signs of torture on the students' bodies incensed their parents and their friends. On 24 March the government ordered a cut in taxes and increased state salaries. The next day, Friday, tens of thousands

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turned out for the funerals of those killed. To disperse them security forces opened fire and killed fifteen more people. A group of enraged protesters tore down the statue of Hafiz Assad, father of Bashar, who had ruled Syria from 1970 to 2000, and who relied on appointing Alawis, some 13 per cent of the population, as heads of the military, police and intelligence agencies. In his speech on 30 March, Bashar Assad said the questions of reform and economic grievances had been overshadowed by a small number of saboteurs who had sought to spread dissension among Syrians, as part of an external conspiracy, to undermine Syria's stability.<sup>31</sup>

Next month, Assad dismissed the cabinet and lifted the Emergency Law, in place since 1963, under which security forces detained and tortured people with impunity. But days later, the crackdown against protesters was stepped up. In May soldiers, supported by tanks, were deployed in restive cities to combat "armed criminal gangs". By mid-May, the death toll had reached 1,000, including dozens of security personnel.<sup>32</sup> Despite the state's ruthless efforts, and pledges by Assad to launch a "national dialogue" on reform, the civilian uprising continued unabated in almost every part of Syria. Opposition supporters had taken up arms, at first in self-defence and then to oust loyalist forces from their areas. Assad denied ordering the military to kill or be brutal in its crackdown on anti-regime protesters, claiming that his forces used live fire only when they were shot at.

Among the regional leaders who agreed with Assad's interpretation was Saudi King Abdullah. Wedded to the status quo, he stood by Assad's regime. But on 8 August he reversed his stance, and withdrew Saudi Arabia's ambassador from Damascus. "What is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia," he said. "Syria should issue and enact reforms that are not merely promises but actual reforms."<sup>33</sup> Ten days later US President Barack Obama endorsed Abdullah's call. Interestingly, on 27 August Iran's foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi was quoted as saying, "The government should answer to the demands of its people, be it Syria, Yemen or other countries. The people of these nations have legitimate demands, and the governments should answer these demands as soon as possible."<sup>34</sup>

But the contexts in the two cases were quite different. Syria had tightened its historic cordial ties with Iran in a series of agreements and pacts between 2004 and March 2007. In the aftermath of the US

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invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the two countries signed a strategic cooperation agreement. At the end of the visit to Tehran by the Syrian Prime Minister, Naji al Otari, in February 2005, he and Iran's Vice-President, Muhammad Reza Aref, announced that their countries had formed a mutual self-defence pact to defend their national borders and confront domestic threats.<sup>35</sup> In June 2006, they inked a military cooperation pact followed by yet another agreement in March 2007.<sup>36</sup>

Finding the Assad regime facing an existential threat, Tehran offered Damascus technical support to monitor internet communications, as well as advising on methods of crowd control, and supplying it batons and riot police helmets. Behind the scenes, Iran's Al Quds force, the external arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), provided technical and material support for Syria's crackdown on demonstrators. But Iran's assistance made little difference.

By the year-end, Assad had abrogated the Baath Party's constitutional monopoly over power and held local elections on a multi-party basis. On the other hand, by then the death toll had exceeded 5,000 in a continuing crackdown, according to the United Nations. In his long, televised speech on 10 January 2012, Assad drew a parallel between the recent bombings in the capital and the Islamist revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood, whose armed struggle against the Alawi-dominated regime reached a peak with an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate President Hafiz Assad in June 1980. Led by Hafiz Assad, the Parliament passed a law which made membership of the Brotherhood a capital offence. Armed with this draconian law the security forces went on a rampage, meting out summary justice. As a consequence, the Islamist rebellion petered out. Now his son, Bashar, denounced the Syrian rebels, invariably Sunni, who formed 70 per cent of the Syrian population as terrorists and traitors. "There can be no let-up for terrorism—it must be hit with an iron fist," he declared. "There's no tolerance of terrorism or of those who use weapons to kill."<sup>37</sup> This marked the next phase of the violent turmoil in Syria, with regional powers intervening actively through proxies.

### *Intervention by Regional Powers*

During the popular street protests in Tunisia and Egypt, Qatar and its highly influential Al Jazeera satellite TV channel had backed the Muslim

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Brotherhood or its surrogate. Since most of Syria's local rebel groups were offshoots of the Brotherhood outlawed in 1982, Qatar started supplying them with arms channeled through Turkey, whose Islamist Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was friendly with the Brotherhood. The first shipment of arms and equipment carried by Qatari Air Force's massive C-130 transport aircraft from Al Udeid Air Base landed at Esenboga Airport near Ankara on 3 January 2012. The clandestine airlift picked up after the November presidential poll in the United States, whose CIA officers assisted Qatar in procuring weapons. Those posted in Turkey worked with Turkish intelligence counterparts to help decide which rebel groups would receive weapons. Not to be seen lagging behind its tiny neighbor, Qatar, Saudi Arabia resorted to supplying weapons and equipment to anti-Assad groups functioning as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), led by defecting officers from Syria's military, from November 2012 onwards, to be channeled through Jordan and Turkey. By March 2013 over 160 military cargo flights by Jordanian, Saudi and Qatari pilots touched down at airports in Turkey and Jordan. "A conservative estimate of the payload of these flights would be 3,500 tons of military equipment," said Hugh Griffiths, of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, adding that it was "a well-planned and coordinated clandestine military logistics operation."<sup>38</sup>

According to a top-secret United States National Security Agency document, accessed by whistleblower Edward Snowden, the rocket attacks on the Presidential Palace, Damascus International Airport, and a government security compound on 18 March 2013, the second anniversary of the civil war, were personally ordered by Prince Salman bin Sultan, son of the long-serving Defence Minister. He had procured 120 tons of explosives and other weaponry for the FSA, instructing it to "light up Damascus" and "flatten" the airport.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere, bolstered by ample supplies, the rebels intensified their campaign of ambushes, roadside bombs and assaults on isolated outposts and expelling Assad's forces from large parts of rural Syria. Meanwhile anti-Assad leaders and several US officials and lawmakers argued that accelerating clandestine arms shipments to the insurgents was necessitated by the weapons being supplied to the Syrian government by Iran and Russia. But the contexts were poles apart.

By virtue of its 2005 self-defence treaty, the Islamic Republic was required to assist Assad to counter domestic threats. Logistically, it was

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easy for Iran to dispatch weapons and other military equipment to Syria in defiance of the UN Security Council Resolution 1929. The Iraqi government of Premier Nouri al Maliki allowed Iran's over flights carrying military supplies to the Assad regime. He authorized oil shipments to the cash-strapped Assad regime at half the market price.<sup>40</sup> Later he would permit a free flow of Iraqi Shia volunteers, trained by Iran's Al Quds officers, to Syria, ostensibly to protect the holy shrine of Sayyida Zainab, a granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, in a Damascus suburb.<sup>41</sup> In the opposition camp, logistically, it was easy for the Syrian insurgents to buy or receive free of charge arms, ammunition and explosives from Sunni tribesmen and militants in neighboring Iraq across the porous border. In addition, the militantly Sunni Al Qaida in Mesopotamia (AQIM) went on to set up its own Syrian branch, named *Jabhat al Nusra* (Arabic: The Nusra Front).<sup>42</sup>

Russia's ties to Syria have deep roots. Historically, given its military links with the Soviet Union since 1956, Syria stayed out of the American orbit during the Cold War. After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, maintaining cordial relations with Moscow became business as usual for Damascus, with the Kremlin continuing to be the chief arms supplier to Syria. More recently, after losing its naval facility in the Libyan port of Benghazi in March 2011, Moscow was keen to retain its naval facilities in the Syrian post of Tartus, dating back to the Cold War, in order to maintain a naval presence in the Mediterranean.

To fulfill its existing contracts, Russia had shipped to Syria advanced, SA-17 surface-to-air missiles (SAM), and short-range missiles. Rebuffing Western pressure, Moscow said that it would be honouring its previously agreed contract which included sophisticated S-300 SAMs.<sup>43</sup>

Mindful of how the Western powers had misused the United Nations Security Council resolution in March 2011 to establish no-fly zones in Libya to protect civilians and to overthrow the Muammar Gaddafi regime, Russia, backed by China, had vetoed Western-sponsored resolutions on Syria at the Council. Playing on the frustration of the three Western permanent members of the Council, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other pro-Washington Arab countries kept pressing President Obama to reverse his decision against intervening militarily in Syria.

This created great anxiety in the Syrian government. Official nervousness reached a peak when on 18 July 2012 a suicide car attack

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directed at the National Security headquarters in Damascus killed the defence minister Daoud Rajha and several heads of the intelligence agencies. On 23 July, Jihad Makdissi, a Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman, said at a televised news conference that “Any stock of WMD [weapons of mass destruction] or unconventional weapons that the Syrian Army possesses will never, never be used against the Syrian people or civilians during this crisis, under any circumstances. These weapons are made to be used strictly and only in the event of external aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic.” By so doing, he offered direct confirmation of what the CIA had said in its 2011 report to Congress. “Syria has had a CW [chemical weapons] program for many years and has a stockpile of CW agents, which can be delivered by aerial bombs, ballistic missiles, and artillery rockets,” noted the document. “We assess that Syria remains dependent on foreign sources for key elements of its CW program, including precursor chemicals.” Five years before, the CIA had stated that Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal included “the nerve agent sarin, which can be delivered by aircraft or ballistic missile.” Earlier in July 2012, in his private meeting with Kofi Annan, the UN’s special envoy for Syria and former UN secretary general, Assad had told him that any chemical weapons were stored in a safe place and they had not been mixed for use, and that they would not be deployed except in the case of foreign invasion.<sup>44</sup>

Four weeks later, at an impromptu news conference at the White House, President Obama said “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation. We’re monitoring that situation very carefully. We have put together a range of contingency plans.”<sup>45</sup>

By early 2013, Iran’s Al Quds Force of its IRGC helped transform hundreds of local pro-government Popular Committees in Syria into a well-structured, 60,000-strong National Defense Forces of salaried militiamen as an auxiliary to the regular army. Their strength would rise to 100,000. They manned checkpoints, patrolled, and assisted in counter-insurgency operations. The more promising recruits were trained in urban guerilla warfare not only by the officers of Al Quds Force but also the Lebanese Hizbollah (also spelled Hezbollah, Party of

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Allah) at bases in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. The Hizbollah militia, formed in 1985, had participated in the Lebanese civil war which ended in 1990.

Iran played a critical role in the creation of Hizbollah. It was the Iranian ambassador to Syria who acted as a catalyst to the merger of several Shia groups who had resisted Israel during its invasion of Lebanon in 1982. As Hizbollah escalated guerrilla attacks on Israeli targets in southern Lebanon it received increasing military aid from Tehran, channeled through Syria. By the spring of 1987, the armory of its military wing—called *al Muqawama al Islamiya* (The Islamic Resistance)—included cannons as well as anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles. In 1991 it had 3,500 militiamen posted in southern Lebanon.<sup>46</sup> It also became the leading Lebanese recipient of financial assistance from Iran, which funded its health, education and other public services. In domestic politics, it secured eight of the 27 seats reserved for Shias in the 1992 Lebanese parliamentary elections. As a result of its alliance with Amal, a moderate Shia group, Hezbollah won all Shia seats, bar one, in the 1996 general election. It intensified its guerrilla activities against Israel occupying southern Lebanon to the point that Israel withdrew from the area in May 2000 as required by a UN Security Council Resolution in 1978. Many years later, it would get entangled in the Syrian civil war for sectarian reasons.

Having ceded most of Aleppo, the largest city and commercial-industrial hub of Syria, to opposition forces in July 2013, the Syrian government resolved to expel rebel Free Syrian Army fighters from parts of Damascus. After achieving that aim, it decided to mete out collective punishment against the residents of Sunni suburbs around the capital, which had become FSA strongholds.

### *Chemical Weapons and Obama's "Red Line"*

The Syrian army focused on Ghouta, a conservative Sunni region about 6 km (3.7 miles) east of the center of Damascus—the scene of ongoing clashes for more than a year, with the military launching repeated missile assaults to dislodge the rebels. In the early hours of 21 August, the Ein Tarma, Zamalka and Muadhmiya neighborhoods of Ghouta were hit by surface-to-surface missiles carrying warheads of sarin nerve

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agent. Of the 3,600 people who showed neurotoxin symptoms, associated with chemical nerve agents, 502 died, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a London-based group with a network of informers in Syria.<sup>47</sup>

Immediately, the opposition claimed that the chemical attack was launched by the military, pointing out two locations from which the missiles had been fired. Its plan was to weaken the rebels before a major conventional attack with tanks, armored personnel carriers and attack planes, it argued. The government denied responsibility, arguing, unconvincingly, that the rebels' mishandling of poison gas had led to the tragedy. Russian officials accused the rebels of staging the attack in order to provoke international military intervention.

In his CNN interview on 23 August, Obama said that when chemical weapons are used, "that starts getting to some core national interests that the United States has." On 28 August he stated that "There need to be international consequences," and two days later he suggested the possibility of taking "limited, narrow" military action. He ordered the Pentagon to develop target lists. Five US destroyers were in the Mediterranean ready to fire cruise missiles at Syrian targets. Obama's statements were warmly welcomed by Saudi Arabia which, since May 2013, had overtaken Qatar as the foremost paymaster for arms and ammunition for the opposition. Adel al Jubeir, the Saudi ambassador to the US, told friends and his superiors in Riyadh that Obama was at last ready to strike Assad's regime. Having "figured out how important this is, he will definitely strike," Jubeir told an interlocutor in Washington.<sup>48</sup>

Not to be caught unawares, by 28 August the Syrian government had transferred its General Staff Command headquarters from central Damascus to bunkers in the foothills of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains north of the capital, and moved various commands to schools and underground bunkers. The barracks and housing compounds for the elite units of the army located in the suburbs of Damascus were evacuated and troops and their families were relocated inside the capital.<sup>49</sup> At the White House, officials were busily building the case that Assad had committed a crime against humanity. But on 29 August, the British Parliament denied Prime Minister David Cameron its endorsement for a possible attack on Syria by 285 to 272 votes. Cameron said he would respect the Parliament's decision.<sup>50</sup>

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The unexpected setback for Cameron, who had repeatedly condemned Assad for massacring his own people, prompted a rethink on Obama's part. In his inaugural speech in January 2009, he had committed the United States to multilateralism, which had been discarded by his predecessor George W. Bush, who had acted unilaterally in Iraq. Obama would later tell Jeffrey Goldberg of the *Atlantic* that he found himself recoiling from the idea of a military attack not sanctioned by international law or US Congress. On 31 August, therefore, he announced that he would ask Congress to authorize a strike beforehand.<sup>51</sup> His decision came as a surprise to some of his advisers, and disappointed the Gulf monarchs. Obama's domestic critics said that he was losing his nerve and passing the buck for his own red line.

A few days later Secretary of State John Kerry headed to Europe, and Obama flew to St Petersburg along with his national security adviser, Susan Rice, for the G20 summit, with a common agenda. They would assemble backing from allies for a statement condemning the 21 August chemical attack, blaming Assad for it, and calling for an unspecified response. This was not to be. In St Petersburg, those who opposed military strikes against Syria without a UN Security Council mandate included the five-strong BRICS powers—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—along with Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, and Argentina.<sup>52</sup> German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the European leader Obama respected most, told him that Germany would not participate in a Syria campaign. Among those who backed the idea of military strikes Saudi Arabia was the most enthusiastic, followed by France. During their one-on-one conversation on 5 September in St Petersburg, President Vladimir Putin asked Obama what if Syria offered to surrender its stockpiles of poison gas to the international community. Obama replied that they should then instruct their top diplomats to explore the offer.

After her return to Washington, Susan Rice briefed Kerry, then in London, who was planning to speak with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. When a reporter asked Kerry if Syria could avoid military strikes, Kerry replied in the affirmative provided Assad promptly handed over his chemical weapons, and added that "He isn't about to do it, and it can't be done." During their telephone conversation, Lavrov referred to Kerry's comments. Kerry remarked that he was

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making a debating point. Never the less, Lavrov said that he planned to make a public proposal that Syria should allow international monitors to control the chemical weapons and ultimately give them up. If this was a serious proposal, then the Obama administration would consider it, replied Kerry.<sup>53</sup>

On 10 September, officials at the White House noted with dismay the result of a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll that only 33 per cent of Americans favored military action against Syria, clearly indicating that the US public was increasingly wary of foreign entanglements and doubtful that an attack would benefit America.<sup>54</sup> Reflecting popular opinion, US Congress was highly unlikely to give a go-ahead to Obama.

As scheduled before, the President delivered a televised address on the night of 10 September. After providing a background to his decision to consider a limited military attack on the Assad regime, and then asking Congress for authorization, he revealed that Syria had agreed to sign the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), an arms control treaty that outlaws the production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons and their precursors. He asserted that “I’ve spent four-and-a-half years working to end wars, not to start them.”<sup>55</sup> He added that he had asked the leaders of Congress to postpone a vote to authorize the use of force while his administration pursued the path of diplomacy offered by Russia.<sup>56</sup>

After two days of negotiations in Geneva, Kerry and Lavrov agreed a deal on 13 September. It specified “immediate and unfettered access” to inspectors of the Organization of the Prevention of Chemical Weapons furnished with a comprehensive list of weapons from Syria. The weapons would be put under international control and removed or destroyed in a process that would begin within a week and be completed by mid-2014. (In the event, the inspectors completed their job in June 2014.) Lavrov explained that any violations by Syria would be notified to the Security Council from the board of the Chemical Weapons Convention before sanctions, short of the use of force, were considered.<sup>57</sup>

Though Kerry stressed that since the US President, as the commander in chief, has the right to defend the United States and its interests regardless of what happens in Congress, and the threat of using force remained open to America, on balance the Geneva agreement favored the Kremlin. It put any American attack firmly on the

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back burner. It also brought the UN Security Council, earlier skirted by the Obama White House, center-stage as the primary agency to implement and supervise the deal. Moscow also managed to spare the Assad regime the degradation of its military capabilities that would have resulted from the Pentagon's strikes and weakened its capabilities in fighting the insurgents.

The Obama White House had a good reason to take into account the interests of the Kremlin because Russia was one of the six major powers engaged in negotiating with Iran on its nuclear program. In September 2013 Obama's officials were engaged in super-secret talks with their Iranian counterparts in Oman to work out details on how to relieve Tehran from the crippling sanctions in return for reduction in its activities in the nuclear field.

### *Obama's Economic Pressure on Iran Pays Off*

Shortly after his inauguration as President in January 2009, Obama exchanged letters with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei, but nothing came of this even though the President quietly shelved the US project to subvert Iran, the one initiated by President George W. Bush after listing it as one the three members of the "Axis of Evil". In July 2009 Iran arrested three American hikers near the Iraqi border, accusing them of espionage. As the White House tried to secure their release, Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman, enjoying friendly relations with Tehran, volunteered to help. One of the Americans, Sarah Shourd, was released in September 2010 on a bail of \$500,000 deposited in an Iranian bank in the Omani capital Muscat, and was allowed to return to the US via Oman.<sup>58</sup> The release of the remaining two hikers, Shane Bauer and Joshua Fattal, who had been tried and sentenced to eight years imprisonment, came a year later after the posting of a \$930,000 bail by Oman.

In June 2011, Fereydoun Abbasi-Davani, Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Agency, said that "This year, under the supervision of the [International Atomic Energy] Agency, we will transfer 20 per cent enrichment from the Natanz site to the Fordow site and we will increase the production capacity by three times."<sup>59</sup> The existence of the Fordow plant, dug into a mountainside near the holy city of Qom, in

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order to render it immune from American or Israeli air strikes, was confirmed by Iran only in September 2009. Its latest decision was open to two interpretations: it was bent on moving forward to the 90 per cent enriched uranium needed for an atom bomb, or planning to use this fact on the ground to bolster its bargaining power in any fresh talks with the six global powers.

As the US President and Congress considered a plan to strangle Iran's oil lifeline, the world's third largest petroleum exporter, the Saudi oil minister Ali Naimi, repeatedly stated that the Kingdom "will use [its] spare production capacity to supply the oil market with any additional required volumes" to make up for the loss of Iran's exports.<sup>60</sup> The US National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012, signed into law by Obama on 31 December 2011, also included sanctions against the central bank of Iran, Bank Markazi, the clearing-house for Iran's oil exports. The provision, effective from 1 June, penalised foreign financial institutions that did business with Bank Markazi, forcing Iran's trading partners to choose between buying oil from it or being excluded from any dealings with US companies.<sup>61</sup>

During his visit to Venezuela, on 10 January 2012, Ahmadinejad brushed aside Western alarm over Iran's decision to start 20 per cent uranium enrichment work at its Fordow plant as "exaggerated and politically motivated."<sup>62</sup> On 23 January 2012 European Union (EU) foreign ministers declared that Iran had "failed to restore international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program." Therefore, the EU has decided to ban the import, purchase and transport of Iranian crude oil and petroleum products as well as related finance and insurance. The existing contracts would be phased out by 1 July. The prohibition also applied to investment and the export of key equipment and technology for Iran's petrochemical sector.<sup>63</sup>

A far more severe blow to Tehran came in March when Iranian banks were disconnected from SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication). SWIFT, based in La Hulpe, an outer suburb of Brussels, is used worldwide to transmit payments and letters of credit across borders through the banking system.<sup>64</sup> Iran's exclusion from SWIFT severely damaged its ability to conduct foreign trade and money transfers.

Iran's threat to retaliate by blocking the Strait of Hormuz, through which about a third of the global oil exports pass daily, proved hollow.

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Indeed, it resumed diplomatic talks with the six world powers in April 2012 in Istanbul. The negotiators adopted a step-by-step process with reciprocal actions in order to create momentum towards a long-term solution. But the two subsequent rounds of talks proved sterile. Western sanctions on Iran's petroleum exports hit the country hard. Tehran's oil revenues fell by more than \$40 billion in 2012, with its exports declining by 40 per cent from the 2011 figure.<sup>65</sup> Reflecting this downturn, the free market value of the Iranian rial fell by half from 13,500 rials to one US dollar in 2011 to 26,100 a year later.

The main beneficiary of Tehran's economic woes was Saudi Arabia which increased its oil market share at Iran's expense. More importantly, by now, the negotiating countries with Iran had tacitly adopted its agenda to deprive Tehran of the *capability* of fabricating a nuclear weapon in the future since their intelligence agencies had concluded that Iran's Supreme Leader Khamanei had decided not to build an atom bomb.

The economic downturn in Iran created a division between the government and the general public. While Ahmadinejad maintained a defiant stance by informing the IAEA in January 2013 that he intended to upgrade uranium enrichment centrifuges, thus purifying uranium at a faster rate, the faltering economy coupled with high inflation had turned public opinion dovish on the subject. This forced the Ahmadinejad government's hand, and it returned to the negotiating table. Iran's talks with the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany (P5+1), chaired by the EU's High Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton, were held in the Kazakh capital of Almaty on 26–27 February 2013.

Of the six major powers, it was the United States which counted most. What was needed then was negotiations between Iran and America which, given their historical animosity, needed to be conducted behind the scenes. That was where mediation by Sultan Qaboos was welcomed by both sides. Personally authorized by President Obama, William Burns, Deputy Secretary of State, and Jake Sullivan, chief foreign policy adviser to Vice-President Joe Biden, led a small team of technical experts on their flight to Muscat in mid-March. There, they met an Iranian team of diplomats, national security aides, and nuclear technical experts. Kerry visited the Omani capital in May ostensibly to push a military contract with the Sultanate.

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On 14 June Hassan Rouhani, a moderate cleric who had led the nuclear team from 2003 to 2005 under President Muhammad Khatami, won the presidential poll outright with 50.7 per cent of the vote. He had campaigned on a platform of easing crippling economic sanctions, and an end to Iran's isolation from the West, with which he was familiar since he had obtained his doctorate from Glasgow University. As a result, the pace and intensity of the clandestine American-Iranian talks picked up. After Rouhani assumed the presidency in early August, four top-secret meetings were held during the next three months.

Intriguingly, in a public speech on 17 September, Khamane'i approved the use of "heroic flexibility" in diplomacy. In his speech before the UN General Assembly, Rouhani offered "time-bound and results-oriented" talks on the nuclear question.<sup>66</sup> On 28 September Obama spoke by phone to Rouhani who was in New York to address the UN General Assembly where, on the sidelines, Kerry met his Iranian counterpart Muhammad Javad Zarif.<sup>67</sup> Little wonder, then, that two clandestine meetings between Iranian and American officials were held in Oman in October.

At the resumed talks between Iran and the P5+1 in October 2013 in Geneva, the new Iranian delegation was led by foreign minister Zarif. Following two more rounds in as many months Zarif signed a Joint Plan of Action with Catherine Ashton, setting out a road map for the final deal. Iran agreed to curb uranium enrichment above 5 per cent and give IAEA inspectors better access in return for releasing \$7 billion of Iran's frozen overseas assets. While the prospects for relaxation of tensions between Iran and the world powers brightened, as a prelude to a final settlement of the nuclear issue, the mood in Riyadh darkened.

Despite the silence maintained by the three concerned parties toward the talks by erstwhile adversaries, unconfirmed reports of these negotiations started circulating in the Gulf region in the summer. The most interested spectators to the long-running contentious issue of Iran's nuclear program were Saudi Arabia and Israel. For different reasons, both of them were resolved to ensure that Iran did not fabricate an atomic bomb. Their best strategy lay in exerting pressure on Washington to deal forcibly with Iran to prevent it from becoming a nuclear state. This, they concluded, would be most effectively achieved

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if a credible case could be built to show that if Iran acquired its own nuclear weapon then Saudi Arabia would follow suit with the active assistance of its traditional ally, Pakistan.

So, as if on cue, on 6 November 2013, BBC Television's *Newsnight*, hosted by Mark Urban, declared that Saudi Arabia could obtain nuclear bombs "at will" from Pakistan. "Earlier this year, a senior NATO decision-maker told me that he had seen intelligence reporting that nuclear weapons made in Pakistan on behalf of Saudi Arabia are now sitting ready for delivery," stated Urban. "Last month Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, told a conference in Sweden that if Iran got the bomb, 'the Saudis will not wait one month. They already paid for the bomb, they will go to Pakistan and bring what they need to bring'." Later in the program Urban said that the information given by the NATO official was believed to have originated in Israel. The timing of this information planted by Israel while talks on Iran's nuclear program were believed to be progressing well seemed suspiciously convenient.<sup>68</sup> The plain truth was that a written nuclear agreement between Riyadh and Islamabad has never been confirmed; nor has it been shown, if it existed, how it would ever be implemented.

After preparatory technical talks were held in Geneva on 7–8 November, Iran and its six interlocutors met at the foreign minister level there later that month. After five days of intensive negotiations, they announced an agreement titled the Joint Plan of Action, commonly known as the Interim Geneva Agreement. It was to become effective on 20 January 2014.

Iran agreed to the following: all uranium enriched beyond 5 per cent will be diluted or converted to uranium oxide; no new uranium at the 3.5 per cent enrichment level will be added to its present stock; 50 per cent of the centrifuges at Natanz and 75 per cent at Fordow will be left inoperable. In addition, Iran will grant the inspectors of the UN watchdog, the IAEA, daily access to the Natanz and Fordow plants. The IAEA will also have access to Iran's uranium mines and centrifuge production facilities. Tehran will address IAEA questions regarding possible military dimensions of its nuclear program and furnish concomitant data as part of an Additional Protocol. In return, Iran will receive relief from sanctions of approximately \$7 billion and no further sanctions will be imposed. The accord allowed Iran to purchase spare parts for

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its aging airline fleet. Also sanctions on the automobile industry and those on associated services will be suspended.<sup>69</sup> The accord set a six-month time frame for a more comprehensive follow-up agreement between Iran and the P5+1.

Between Iran and the US, each side stressed that it got the better of the other. Zarif said the threat of US military strikes was gone. Kerry disagreed. Zarif argued that the agreement explicitly recognized Iran's right to enrich uranium. Kerry again disagreed, though he did so implicitly. As a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran was entitled to nuclear power. The long-running dispute boiled down to *how* Iran was to exercise that right.

Politically, the Iranian deal makers had to cover themselves against a counter-attack by hardliners at home. In his nationally televised speech to the students of Shaheed Beheshti University in December, Rouhani said "Nuclear energy is our absolute right, yes but the right to progress, development, improving people's livelihood and welfare is also our definite right." Khamanei had welcomed the deal and said the negotiators "deserved to be appreciated and thanked." In the United States, the latest Reuters-Ipsos opinion poll showed support for the Geneva Accord by a 2 to 1 margin, with only 20 per cent favoring military action against Iran if the deal failed. In early December Zarif finished a four-day whirlwind tour of the capitals of Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to brief them on the accord and allay fears. He wrote in his Facebook post that he was ready for negotiations with Saudi Arabia whenever Riyadh was ready and added that talks would be "beneficial for both countries, the region and the Muslim world." Earlier, the Saudi cabinet had said, "If there is goodwill, this agreement could represent a preliminary step toward a comprehensive solution to the Iranian nuclear program."<sup>70</sup> Unsurprisingly, there was no pick-up of Zarif's offer by the Saudi Kingdom. Tehran and Riyadh remained locked in a bitter struggle in Syria.

In April 2014 the IAEA said that Iran had neutralized half of its 20 per cent enriched uranium stockpile as agreed earlier. Four months later the sixth and final round of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group started in Vienna, but failed to meet the November 2014 deadline for the final deal.

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### *Syrian Civil War, 2014*

The ongoing Syrian civil war became more complicated in 2014, with the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS; also known as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) as a major player. Having seized the provincial capital of Raqqa—located 230 miles east of Damascus—from other Syrian rebels on 14 January, ISIS declared it its capital city.

ISIS was the latest incarnation of Al Qaida in Mesopotamia, having evolved from Islamic State in Iraq in April 2013 under the leadership of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, who succeeded Abu Omar al Baghdadi after the latter's death in May 2010. A native of Baghdad, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (born 1971) obtained a doctorate in Quranic Studies from Saddam University in the capital. He was arrested by US forces in February 2004 as Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al Badry, his name at birth. He was freed in December as a "low level prisoner". In the Islamic State in Iraq's leadership he served as the head of its Sharia Committee until his elevation to the top post. Taking advantage of the civil war in Syria, he extended the violent activities of his organization to Syria. In April 2013 he announced the formation of ISIS.

Both ISIS ideology and Wahhabi Islam shared their pathological hostility to Shias, who were condemned as apostate for their practice of praying at the tombs of saints, and whose mosques and gatherings were frequent targets of its suicide bombings. Another common ideological point with Wahhabism was the commitment to the principle of *hisba*, which is synonymous with "commanding right and forbidding wrong" (*al-aamr bi-l-maaruf wa-l-nahi aan al-munkar*). It designates the prime duty of Muslims to encourage their fellow believers to abide by the teachings of Islam and punish those who do not. The leaflets distributed by ISIS in Mosul said that in accordance with Sharia law women must stay indoors, and be accompanied by a male member of the family when venturing outside, and that the hands of thieves would be chopped off.<sup>71</sup> Later on, ISIS would replicate the restrictions that were imposed in Ikhwan colonies established by Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud in the 1920s. That meant a ban on smoking, singing or dancing, listening to music, and wearing gold or silk—coupled with an obligatory performance of Islamic rituals.

In its intensified armed struggle against the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, ISIS captured Anbar Province's leading

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cities of Falluja and Ramadi by early 2014. That put Maliki on the defensive. In his public speech in mid-February he claimed that Saudi Arabia and Qatar were offering cash to recruit fighters in Falluja to win more territory for ISIS. Citing unnamed analysts and US officials, the *Washington Post* reported that over the past two years citizens in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait had quietly contributed vast sums of money to and joined the ranks of ISIS and other jihadist groups fighting Assad's regime in Syria.<sup>72</sup>

Maliki went further. In his interview with France 24 television on 8 March, he said, "I accuse them [Saudi Arabia and Qatar] of inciting and encouraging the terrorist movements. I accuse them of supporting them politically and in the media, of supporting them with money and by buying weapons for them." He also blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar for launching Syria's civil war through Al Qaida-linked groups that now operated on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border. "They are attacking Iraq through Syria indirectly. They absolutely started the war in Iraq, they started the war in Syria." According to him, ISIS had been one of the biggest fighting forces in Syria's civil war.<sup>73</sup>

ISIS had achieved this status by overpowering less extreme jihadist groups battling the Syrian military. To a certain extent this worked to the advantage of Assad's regime. In May 2014, the Syrian army regained control of previously rebel areas of Homs. It also made gains in Aleppo and consolidated its control of western Aleppo.

The Syrian government held the presidential poll under the new constitution in the areas under its control on 3 June. Also many thousands of Syrians living abroad, who were entitled to vote, cast their ballots. According to official sources, voter turn-out was 73.4 per cent—with Assad securing 10,319,723 ballots, or 88.7 per cent of the total, and his two rivals 7.5 per cent. The delegation of officials from more than thirty countries, including legislators and dignitaries from Iran, Russia and Venezuela, toured polling stations. Kerry called the election "a great big zero." By contrast, a joint statement issued by the visiting delegations, and read out by Alaeddin Boroujerdi, head of the Iranian parliament's Committee on National Security, said that "These elections have happened in ... a transparent, democratic way... These elections in Syria pave the way for a new stage of stability and national agreement in this country after more than three years of war imposed by foreign parties."<sup>74</sup>

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The subsequent jubilation in Tehran at Assad's re-election subsided sharply on 9 June when ISIS captured Mosul, the second largest city of Iraq, and seized a huge arsenal of US-made arms and ammunition as well as \$429 million in cash from the Central Bank. Armed with advanced weaponry, ISIS forces rapidly marched southward. Their officers made a point of filming their ranks shooting dead Shia prisoners of war, and uploading the images.<sup>75</sup> This was an important tactic of ISIS leaders to demoralise its enemy.

In Riyadh there was *schadenfreude* among King Abdullah and senior princes, who were glad to see the emergence of powerful Sunni forces to challenge Maliki's Shia-dominated administration, two-and-a-half years after the US pullout from Iraq.

The dramatic victory of ISIS came at a time of political flux in Baghdad in the aftermath of the general election on 30 April. The result announced in mid-May showed the State of the Law Coalition (SLC) winning 92 of the 328 seats. The members of the al Daawa party, the largest constituent of the SLC, opted for Haider al Abadi as the party chief instead of Maliki. In his interview with the *Huffington Post*, Abadi said, "We are waiting for the Americans to give us support. If US air strikes [happen], we don't need Iranian air strikes. If they don't, then we may need Iranian strikes."<sup>76</sup> The Parliament elected Muhammad Fuad Massum, a Kurdish leader, as President, and he took office on 24 July in the midst of a military crisis in Iraq.

When ISIS militia besieged Samarra, sixty-five miles north of Baghdad, alarm bells rang not only in Tehran but also Washington. ISIS "could pose a threat eventually to American interests as well," Obama said in a televised address, but vowed not to be "dragged back into a situation in which, while we're there keeping a lid on things, and after enormous sacrifices by us, as soon as we're not there, people end up acting in ways that are not conducive to the long-term stability and prosperity of the country."<sup>77</sup> He would soon dispatch several hundred US armed forces personnel to Iraq to assess how best the Pentagon could support the Iraqi Security Forces.

By contrast, the Iranian government sent General Qassim Suleimani of its Al Quds Force to Baghdad to assist with the defence of the capital. He met with Shia militia leaders, eager to join the anti-ISIS campaign, and Sunni tribal chiefs in control of Baghdad's western

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approaches. In the face of the lethal hostility of ISIS, encouraged by Suleimani, various Shia militias in Iraq coalesced under the umbrella of the 140,000-strong Popular Mobilization Forces (Arabic: *Al Hashd Al Shaabi*), overseen by the Interior Ministry. Iran started flying drones over Iraq to assist the government in Baghdad. The state-run Islamic Republic News Agency quoted General Hossein Salami of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as saying that his forces were “in full combat readiness” to join the fight in Iraq if necessary.<sup>78</sup> By the end of July the IRGC had increased its supply of arms and funds to proxy Shia groups, and Shia fighters operating as the Popular Mobilization Forces had spread south from Samarra to Baghdad and down into the farming communities south of the capital.<sup>79</sup>

In addition, Iran provided aid to the Iraqi defence ministry. A close study of video footage of Russian-made Sukhoi Su-25 “Frogfoot” ground attack jets, posted by the Iraqi authorities in early July, showed that these originally belonged to Iran’s IRGC whose insignia and serial numbers had been camouflaged. Seven such warplanes used to be part of the Iraqi Air Force under Saddam Hussein and were flown to Iran for safekeeping during the 1991 Gulf War. They were not returned after the war, and became part of the IRGC’s air force.<sup>80</sup>

Heady with a string of dramatic military victories, on 24 June, ISIS announced the establishment of a worldwide Caliphate with al Baghdadi, called Caliph Ibrahim, as its caliph, and ISIS itself was renamed Islamic State. (In the popular media, however, ISIS remained very much in place while in the Arabic speaking world, it was Daesh, the acronym for *al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham*, an Arabic verb, meaning creating disunity.) On the first Friday of Ramadan, which fell on 4 July, ISIS released a 22-minute video of al Baghdadi’s sermon from the pulpit of the leading mosque of Mosul. After welcoming the establishment of Islamic State, he said, “Appointing a leader is an obligation on Muslims, and one that has been neglected for decades.” He added that “I am your leader, though I am not the best of you, so if you see that I am right, support me, and if you see that I am wrong, advise me.”<sup>81</sup>

On 7 August Obama authorized targeted airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq, along with airdrops of aid to refugees. Four days later Iraqi President Massum appointed Abadi as the Prime Minister-designate. Maliki objected, and reneging on his promise not to seek a third term

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of office, refused to step down. By then soldiers of Iran's Al Quds Force were guarding the golden-domed shrine of two Shia Imams in Samarra, and offering resistance to ISIS forces elsewhere. The power struggle in Baghdad gave Tehran increased leverage to shape Iraqi politics—a fact noted with trepidation in Riyadh. When Iran favored Abadi, Maliki vacated his post on 13 August, and promised to back his erstwhile rival.

Later that month ISIS beheaded two American citizens and posted a video in each case. By the time Obama came up with an overarching anti-ISIS strategy and explained it in a televised address on 10 September—two days after Abadi's "national salvation government" was sworn in—the Pentagon had launched 154 air strikes in Iraq and deployed over 1,100 troops and advisers in non-combat roles. "If left unchecked, these [ISIL] terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region—including to the United States," said Obama. "While we have not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland, ISIL leaders have threatened America and our allies." After stating that the United States will conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists, he said, "I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria as well as Iraq." He announced that he will send an additional 475 service members to Iraq to help identify ISIL targets in Iraq and Syria by using US drones and helicopters.<sup>82</sup>

As before, Obama was intent on making this campaign a multilateral project. At the NATO summit in Wales on 4–5 September his approach to NATO allies had a good response. And he sought active co-operation in the Gulf region as well, starting with Saudi Arabia. He called King Abdullah before delivering his TV address and sought his kingdom's participation.<sup>83</sup> Thus the US-led anti-ISIS air campaign consisted of 15 participants—eight NATO members, including Turkey, and Egypt and six Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia. Of its 305 combat aircraft, Riyadh placed a dozen under the Pentagon's command.

From now on, Obama treated ISIS as the number one enemy of the United States. According to the CIA, ISIS, controlling a third of Iraq and a quarter of Syria, commanded 20,000 to 31,500 fighters, way up from its previous estimate of 10,000.<sup>84</sup> With that, toppling Assad became a low priority issue for Washington. The contrary was the case in the Saudi Kingdom.

The US-led air strikes on ISIS and smaller jihadist groups prompted the leaders of al Nusra Front, Ahrar al Sham and other Syrian rebel

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groups to explore the prospect of uniting to face a common danger on 1 November 2014. These talks failed, however. The continued divisions within the broad jihadist camp helped the Syrian government. For instance, it retook the Jhar and Mahr gas fields near Homs from ISIS which had benefited from these fields financially.

In mid-December, General James Terry, commander of the Combined Joint Task Force in Iraq, announced that there had been 1,361 air strikes against ISIS so far.<sup>85</sup> As a result of these bombing raids ISIS had failed to capture more territory either in Syria or Iraq since early September. Around the same time it was reported that Iran had launched airstrikes against ISIS forces along its border with Iraq in an attempt to display its growing military influence in the region in the face of Washington's resurgent role.<sup>86</sup> Both Iranian and American sources emphasized that there had been no coordination between the two sides or sharing of intelligence. Among other things, this reassured the Saudis who feared such an eventuality even if agreed temporarily.

The twenty-third day of the following year witnessed the death from lung cancer of Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, the monarch and regent of the Desert Kingdom for twenty years. His successor, Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, would upend the House of Saud in more ways than one while ratcheting up the rivalry with Iran.

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The sad-eyed seventy-nine-year-old Salman, wearing a de rigueur dyed black mustache and a goatee beard, stood as tall as Ibn Saud, and resembled his father more than any of his full and half-brothers. As the governor of Riyadh for forty-eight years (1963–2011), Salman acted as a mediator in the vastly expanded Saudi royal family, riven by a complex network of competing factions as they battled for the control of important ministries and governorships. This gave him a unique insight into the power plays within the House of Saud. He went on to deploy it to shake up the traditionally cautious, incremental way the Kingdom had been administered since its inception. On ascending the throne, with his net worth of \$17 billion, he became the third richest monarch in the world after Bhumibol Adulyadej, King of Thailand, and Hassanal Bolkiah, Sultan of Brunei. Besides his over-generous royal stipend and profitable financial holdings in the Kingdom's petroleum industry, he inherited a sizable proportion of late King Abdullah's \$18 billion fortune.<sup>1</sup>

### *“Game of Thrones” in the Desert Kingdom*

Salman was one of the seven blood brothers born to Hassa al Sudairi.<sup>2</sup> Given the Sudairi Seven's mutual loyalty, and their superiority in terms of their size compared to any other group of blood brothers, they had

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emerged as the powerhouse of the royal family. Salman's predecessor, King Abdullah, being a child of Fahda al Shraim, was not part of this blood brotherhood. Yet going by strict seniority, he named two of the surviving Sudairis—the shrewd-eyed Sultan and flabby-faced Nayef—as successive Crown Princes, only to see them die in October 2011 and June 2012 respectively, the latter as a result of diabetes and poor blood circulation.<sup>3</sup> After polling each member of the 37-strong Allegiance Council separately in March 2014, Abdullah named the wide-eyed, mustached, moon-faced (non-Sudairi) Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz as the Deputy Crown Prince, with Salman bin Abdul Aziz as the Crown Prince, the status accorded to him in June 2012.

The upending of the dynastic protocol that King Salman accomplished within the first 100 days of his rule proved to be a curtain-raiser to the final act in the real life “Game of Thrones” in Saudi Arabia on 21 June 2017. On that day, at Mecca’s royal palace, King Salman elevated his son Muhammad to Crown Prince at the expense of his older cousin, Muhammad bin Nayef, who was also stripped of his position as the Interior Minister. His successor was one of his nephews, thirty-three-year-old Abdul Aziz bin Saud bin Nayef. Since he lacked experience in law enforcement, intelligence or counterterrorism matters, King Salman would soon after reduce the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry to traffic fines, drug enforcement and passport control, and establish a new organization called the State Security Presidency, to report to him directly.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the new Crown Prince and his ousted cousin made a show of solidarity in front of state television cameras, with Bin Salman kneeling in front of the older royal and vowing: “We will not give up on taking your guidance and advice.” In return, Bin Nayef said, “I am content.”<sup>5</sup> This was pretence of the highest order.

When Bin Nayef returned to his palace in Jeddah he found that the guards loyal to him had been replaced by the ones owing their loyalty to Bin Salman. He was barred from traveling abroad.<sup>6</sup> Bin Salman’s prime aim was to prevent him from flying to Washington, where he had high level contacts, and spilling the beans about how his downfall was engineered by Bin Salman and his father, providing valuable insights into political chicanery within the opaque Saudi inner circle.

Committed to displaying unity in the House of Saud, royals had become past masters in pretending and creating feints to hide their real

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feelings and motivations, thus masking the ongoing rivalries that existed between different branches of the ruling dynasty, rooted in the many wives that Ibn Saud acquired. After Muhammad bin Salman had been named Deputy Crown Prince by his father on 15 April 2015, he told an interlocutor that he did not expect to become king until he was fifty-five, which was roughly the then age of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef.<sup>7</sup> Reality was starkly different. From the moment Bin Salman became Deputy Crown Prince, he colluded with his father to undermine Bin Nayef.

### *“The Prince” Among Princes*

Standing in front of his vast office desk in a loose ankle length shirt, called a *thobe*, but shorn of the Arab head dress—a square, checked cotton scarf held down by a round black hosepipe-like rope, called an *agal*—his rich black beard and fast receding hairline made Muhammad bin Salman (known in diplomatic circles as MBS) look older than his age. By his own account, both his parents were strict taskmasters. His father made him read a book a week, and his mother, Fahda bint Falah bin Sultan al Hithalayn—nearly twenty years junior to her husband when she married him as his third and last wife in 1984—had her staff arrange extracurricular courses and field trips for him as well as sessions with intellectual mentors. Unlike his four elder half-brothers, who enrolled at Western universities, he obtained his undergraduate degree in law in 2007, at the age of 22, from King Saud University, Riyadh, where the medium of instruction is Arabic, except for medicine and engineering, which are taught in English. However, the Languages Unit provides English language support at all levels. Going by Bin Salman’s references to the writings of Sir Winston Churchill in his January 2016 interview with *The Economist*,<sup>8</sup> it seems he availed of this facility. He proudly described himself as someone who belonged to the generation that grew up playing video games and later became an avid user of the products of Apple Inc.

After his graduation, at his father’s urging he joined the office of the cabinet’s legal adviser. He found bureaucrats too lethargic and hide-bound when he tried to get certain company laws and rules changed. When he failed to win a promotion after two years he left to work for

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his father who was then the governor of Riyadh. As the gatekeeper for his father's office, he upset the old guard who complained to King Abdullah. In October 2011 the eighty-four-year-old Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, who had run the defence ministry for forty-eight years, died of cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Abdullah named Prince Salman as defence minister but ruled out his son Muhammad's presence in the ministry. So the young, restless prince went on to reorganise his father's foundation for building affordable houses. In June 2012, after the death of Crown Prince Nayef, Prince Salman inherited his office. The new Crown Prince appointed his favorite son, Muhammad, his chief of court, thus paving the way for the young prince to get close to the eighty-nine-year-old, ailing King Abdullah. In his dying days, the monarch ordered Muhammad bin Salman to clean up the defence ministry, then riddled with corruption.

Working with two American management consultancies, Bin Salman changed the procedures for weapons procurement, by putting the legal department in the driving seat. Sidelining this department had led to faulty contracts being signed, which fostered widespread corruption. Bin Salman sent back dozens of contracts for revision, and went on to set up a separate office to analyse arms deals. Later, while briefing reporters from *Bloomberg Businessweek*, the director general of the defence minister's office, Fahad al Eissa, said, "Many weapons purchases had been misconceived and inappropriately vetted, with no clear purpose. We are the fourth-largest military spender in the world, yet when it comes to the quality, we are barely in the top twenty."<sup>9</sup>

On assuming the throne in January 2015, Salman handed over the defence ministry to Muhammad. Reportedly afflicted with dementia, which caused him periodic memory losses, Salman was able to concentrate for only a few hours in a day. His son helped by acting as a strict gatekeeper. After a week the king appointed him head of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA) which, replacing the earlier Supreme Economic Commission, was mandated to coordinate economic reforms to tackle low petroleum prices. Two months later, King Salman's cabinet decided to transfer the Public Investment Fund from the Finance Ministry to CEDA. It named a new board of directors with Bin Salman as its chairman. Yet more powers were to be placed in the hands of the young prince on 1 May. On that day the monarch dis-

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solved the Supreme Council for Petroleum and Mineral Affairs and established a ten-member Supreme Council of Saudi Aramco, which was split off from the Oil Ministry. Unsurprisingly, the new body was to be chaired by Muhammad bin Salman. The intent, according to senior officials, was to see that the oil behemoth was better monitored, audited and governed as part of radical economic reforms.

In mid-April 2016, in the course of his briefing to *Bloomberg Businessweek*, Bin Salman shed light on the hitherto opaque governance of the Saudi Kingdom. "From the first twelve hours [of Salman's rule], decisions were issued. In the first ten days, the entire government was restructured."<sup>10</sup> A day after acceding the throne, King Salman ordered the merger of his court with that of the Crown Prince Bin Nayef, with a committee led by his son Muhammad to implement his decree.<sup>11</sup> This meant that the Crown Prince had to rely on the goodwill of the Deputy Crown Prince to see the monarch.

Bin Nayef was kept in the dark on matters of vital importance. When, on 26 March 2015, Bin Salman spearheaded an air campaign in neighboring Yemen to oust the Houthi rebels from the capital, Sanaa, after forging a coalition of several Gulf monarchies and Egypt, he kept Bin Nayef out of the loop. Equally, he ignored Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, minister of the National Guard, who was then out of the country.

When invited by President Barack Obama to a summit of Gulf monarchs at Camp David in May 2015 for a briefing on the talks between Iran and six world powers on Tehran's nuclear program, King Salman deputed Bin Nayef to attend along with Bin Salman. When in his interview with the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV channel, Obama said that the younger Prince Muhammad was "wise beyond his years," he boosted Bin Salman's inflated ego at the expense of his much older cousin.<sup>12</sup> Despite his denials, Bin Salman's rivalry with Crown Prince Bin Nayef became a subject of gossip among the Kingdom's chattering classes and the rest of the Arab world. However, this power struggle was one-sided because the young Muhammad had thoroughly eclipsed his namesake cousin, who was senior to him by twenty-six years.

When Salman had a meeting with Obama in the White House on 4 September 2015, he was accompanied not by the Crown Prince but his Deputy Crown Prince son, Muhammad. Savoring the compliment Obama had paid the young prince, Bin Salman violated diplomatic

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protocol by delivering a soliloquy about the failures of American foreign policy during the Oval Office meeting.<sup>13</sup>

Soon after his return to Riyadh, King Salman sacked Saad al Jabri, a minister of state, who was Bin Nayef's top adviser. According to WikiLeaks, Jabri had acted as the point-man of Bin Nayef since at least 2006, and had been the kingdom's main intelligence contact with the US and other Western nations. Jabri's transgression was that he had questioned Bin Salman's tactics in Yemen which had led Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to grow stronger there, and created fresh pressures from Yemeni refugees and insurgents along the Saudi border.<sup>14</sup> Whereas in theory Bin Nayef was empowered to administer political and security affairs, in reality his writ did not run beyond the interior ministry, which included the feared *Mabahith al Aam* (Arabic: General Investigative Directorate), popularly known as the secret police.

To placate Bin Nayef's bruised ego, the monarch sent him to New York to deliver a speech at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 21 September. On his return journey, the Crown Prince paid a state visit in Ankara. If those official assignments reassured Bin Nayef to a certain extent, that feeling disappeared before the year-end. On 15 December Bin Salman announced that thirty-four Muslim nations had joined a Saudi-led military alliance to fight terrorism, and that a joint operations center would be set up in Riyadh to counter extremism in Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Except for Egypt, none of these countries appeared on the list. As for the alliance, twenty-three of the participants were African nations, and all of them had been recipients of Saudi financial aid.<sup>15</sup> Unsurprisingly, Iran was not a member of this alliance; nor was Indonesia, the largest Muslim nation in the world.

In the Saudi Kingdom counterterrorism had been the domain of Prince Bin Nayef since 2003, but Bin Salman's newly created body had no role for him or his resourceful Interior Ministry. Bin Nayef found this rebuff intolerable, but he lacked direct access to the king where he could express his feelings in private. He left the kingdom along with his family for his villa in Algeria, a sprawling compound an hour's drive north of Algiers. Though he was in the habit of taking a short hunting vacation annually in Algeria, this time he stayed away for six weeks, mainly incommunicado, often failing to respond to messages from Saudi officials and close associates in Washington. Even John Brennan,

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the CIA director, whom he had known for many years, had difficulty reaching him.<sup>16</sup> None of this made an iota of difference to the plan of Salman and his favorite son to undercut Bin Nayef even when, as feared by him, Bin Salman's war against the Shia Houthis had turned into an expensive, embarrassing stalemate.

### *Riyadh's Military Intervention in Yemen*

During the Arab Spring turmoil that led to the stepping down of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh after thirty-two years in power in February 2012, the Zaidi Shia rebels, loyal to Abdul Malik al Houthi, swelled. These dissenters, based in north-west Yemen, had been at odds with the central government since 2004, leading to several rounds of fighting between them and the army. During the longest period of combat, from August 2009 to February 2010, the Saudi military joined the Yemeni army to curb the rebels. When pro-democracy protests started a year later, the Houthis participated in them. In the nationwide turmoil that followed, the size of the armed and unarmed Houthis swelled to 120,000. They extended their traditional control of Saada province to the Zaidi-majority provinces of Hajjah and Amran along the Saudi border, much to the alarm of Riyadh.<sup>17</sup>

As part of the agreement that Saleh signed with the mediating Gulf Cooperation Council, Vice President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, a Sunni, followed Saleh after a presidential election in which he was the sole candidate. In line with the GCC-brokered agreement, he set up a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) as a forum to solve the country's political problems in order to create a basis for a new constitution and fresh elections before the end of his two-year transition period. This proved to be a Herculean task for the politically inept Hadi. Yet parliament extended his tenure by a year in January 2014.

This was not acceptable to the Houthis. They advanced toward the capital Sanaa, where the deposed Saleh quietly rejoiced at the threat they posed to Hadi who had failed to gain the loyalty of the army. As a result of cuts to state subsidies in August, fuel prices rose sharply. This led to anti-Hadi demonstrations in the capital. It was in these circumstances that the insurgent Houthis besieged Sanaa on 21 September. They met no resistance from the demoralised and disunited army, or

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the disaffected politicians. Yet their leaders decided to sign a deal with Hadi, brokered by the United Nations representative, Jamal Benomar, to form a unity government and draft a new constitution. However, the subsequent negotiations dragged on for many weeks.

Frustrated, on 22 January 2015, Houthi leaders compelled Hadi to resign. And a week later they seized the presidential palace and placed Hadi under virtual house arrest. At the UN Security Council, responding to the GCC's lobbying, Jordan along with Britain tabled a resolution on Yemen. Passed unanimously on 15 February, it deplored the Houthis' decision to dissolve Parliament and take over Yemen's administration, and called on the militia to withdraw from government institutions.<sup>18</sup> Houthi leaders ignored the resolution, but allowed Hadi to escape his detention.

Hadi fled to his hometown of Aden, withdrew his resignation, and denounced the Houthi takeover as an unconstitutional coup. The Houthis named a Revolutionary Committee to assume the powers of the presidency along with the long-established General People's Congress, a political party to which Saleh and Hadi belonged. The ruling Committee inaugurated direct air flights between Sanaa and Tehran, offered Iran port facilities, and signed a lucrative oil deal with the National Iranian Oil Company.<sup>19</sup>

This seemed to be enough evidence for Saudi officials and media to start describing Shia Houthis as proxies of Iran. Actually, Houthis' Zaidi sub-sect within Shia Islam is different from Iranians' Twelver sub-sect—so named because of the number of Shia Imams revered by the members of this group. The list begins with Imam Ali and ends with Muhammad al Qassim, who as an infant disappeared in the Iraqi city of Samarra in 837 CE. Zaidis share the first four Imams of the Twelvers, but follow a different line with Zaid, son of Muhammad bin Hanafiya who was a step brother of Imam Hussein, the third Imam.<sup>20</sup> Historically, therefore, there have been no religious or political contacts between the Shias in Yemen and those in Iran.

Now, in early March 2015, the Saudi government was alarmed when Saleh—a Shia of the Zaidi sub-sect with a flair for manipulating competing Sunni tribal leaders through patronage and coercion to retain his presidency for thirty-two years, and still controlling most of the elite Republican Guards—joined the Houthi camp. Together these forces started marching south towards Aden.

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On 25 March, Hadi fled Aden by boat, and arrived in Riyadh where the defence ministry had already rallied Egypt and six other Arab countries to mount Operation Decisive Storm against the anti-Hadi forces the next day. Apart from Oman, the other members of the GCC had responded positively to Bin Salman's invitation, as had four Arab recipients of Saudi aid—Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan. While staying out of the coalition, Sultan Qaboos of Oman allowed it the use of Omani airspace and closed Oman's border with Yemen. Contrary to Bin Salman's expectation that the shock and awe of the Saudi-led coalition's air offensive would put the Houthi-Saleh alliance to flight from Sanaa, his adversaries showed remarkable staying power. Indeed, they launched artillery and mortar attacks across the border at Saudi urban centers in the Asir region, and made small ground incursions. They also continued their march to capture Aden.

It emerged later that preparations for a massive offensive against the Houthi-Saleh alliance had begun several weeks earlier. In early March Adel bin Ahmad al Jubeir, the Saudi ambassador to the US, called on President Obama, seeking his urgent assistance for a new war in the Middle East. Iran, he claimed, was aiding Houthi rebels in Yemen, who were attempting to set up ballistic missile sites in the range of Saudi cities. The Kingdom along with its Gulf neighbors was about to launch an offensive in support of Yemen's weak government led by Hadi—a campaign most likely to be short. Since Obama did not see Yemen's civil war jeopardizing US national security he let his close advisers debate the issue. Those who opposed cooperation with the Saudis argued that the Riyadh-led campaign would be long, bloody and indecisive. And those who offered the counter-argument said that the White House needed to appease King Salman as it inched towards completing a nuclear agreement with Tehran. Calming the nerves of Salman won the day. Obama instructed the Pentagon to support the upcoming Saudi-led military offensive short of putting boots on the ground. It ended up providing the coalition airborne intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, operational planning, maritime interdiction, medical support and aerial refueling.<sup>21</sup>

To its great disappointment, Saudi Arabia failed to co-opt Pakistan in its military plan. On 5 March King Salman went out of his way to greet Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at Riyadh International

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Airport along with his full cabinet. During his meeting with Sharif he called for the participation of Pakistani warships, aircraft and ground troops in the military intervention he was planning to make in the ongoing civil war in Yemen to defeat the Houthi rebels. Sharif agreed to put the request before the National Assembly.

After five days of debate, on 10 April parliamentarians unanimously backed the resolution that “Pakistan should maintain neutrality in the Yemeni conflict.” Many lawmakers viewed the Saudi move as part of its anti-Shia policy and its ongoing rivalry with Iran in the region. Noting that extremist Sunni jihadists continued to target Shia gatherings in Pakistan, killing hundreds, the legislators in Islamabad stayed out of the Saudi-led coalition in order not to deepen the Sunni-Shia divide in their country, which had the second largest Muslim population in the world. Tellingly, during the debate Iran’s Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif arrived in Islamabad, and met the Prime Minister as well as the Army Chief General Raheel Sharif. Given the military’s counter-terrorism campaign against the Pakistani Taliban and tensions with India, Raheel Sharif found his hands tied, making him unable to help Riyadh. While confirming the Parliament’s decision, the Prime Minister expressed his preference for a diplomatic solution to the Yemeni conflict.<sup>22</sup> Zarif won, and Bin Salman lost. It was hard for King Salman to accept the rebuff from Islamabad, which meant missing out on deploying its battle-hardened soldiers. He had to console himself with the imposition of a naval blockade of Yemen by Egypt and the United States.

The Saudi government gave the US only a few hours advance warning before the start of its bombing campaign on 26 March. And yet Washington readily lined up with France and Britain at the UN Security Council for a resolution on Yemen. Resolution 2216, passed under Chapter VII on 14 April, by 14 votes to none, with Russia abstaining, called on the Houthis to withdraw from all areas seized during the latest conflict, relinquish arms seized from military and security institutions, cease all actions falling exclusively within the authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen and fully implement previous Council resolutions. It called on all Yemeni parties to resume the UN-brokered political transition.<sup>23</sup> This resolution strengthened the diplomatic hand of Saudi Arabia. In addition, it conferred legitimacy to American and British military personnel working with the Saudi command-and-

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control center for coalition airstrikes. But it had little immediate impact on the ground fighting.

### *Unintended Consequences of the Saudis' Yemen Offensive*

Having hastily intervened in the long drawn out and convoluted Yemeni civil war, Bin Salman found himself without a clear strategy or exit plan.<sup>24</sup> But, when questioned on the subject by *The Economist* in January 2016, he replied that the decision to go forward with the intervention had been taken by the Council of Ministers and the Council of Security and Political Affairs, and approved by King Salman, and that all he did as Defence Minister was to implement it<sup>25</sup> His statement clashed with the fact that Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, commander of the 100,000-strong National Guard, was out of the country in late March, and was neither consulted nor informed in advance by Bin Salman.

At the outset Bin Salman ruled out putting Saudi boots on the ground in Yemen. He had failed to learn a cardinal principle of military strategy: to seize control of territory from the enemy, a ground offensive must follow an air campaign. As a result, his military intervention in the Arab world's poorest nation, with its per capita annual GDP of \$1,340, turned into a brutal quagmire, draining the Saudi treasury of \$6 billion a month.

Bin Salman was so haughtily confident of achieving his declared aim of defeating the Houthis-Saleh alliance within six months, that in late June he went on a pre-planned two-week vacation in The Maldives. Ashton Carter, defence secretary of the United States, which had agreed to support the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, had trouble reaching him for days during part of his sojourn.<sup>26</sup> Bin Salman rented the exclusive Velaa private island with its six-star luxury hotel. He also took over the nearby island as a base for his extensive staff and support team of bodyguards and advisers. For entertainment, he was reported to have hired such A-list celebrities as Shakira, Rihanna, and Jennifer Lopez. The cost of his profligate holiday was put at \$8 million.<sup>27</sup>

In Yemen, after four weeks of relentless air strikes, the Saudi Defence Ministry claimed that the coalition's action had "successfully eliminated the threat" to the Kingdom's security posed by the ballistic missiles and heavy weaponry of the Houthis and their allies led by Saleh. The intervention by Egyptian warships in the crucial Aden region

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gave the pro-Hadi forces an irreversible edge over the Houthis and their allies. And yet, on 27 April, a Saudi air raid on the village of Shaaf, twenty miles south of Saada in north Yemen, involved dropping a deadly US-supplied CBU-105, a cluster bomb unit that contains 10 high-explosive sub-munitions, designed to be used exclusively on military targets. When dropped, this bomb fragments into 10 high-explosive sub-munitions which scatter over a large area and explode on hitting the ground. A video recording of the remnants of the cluster bomb posted on YouTube was investigated by the New York-based Human Rights Watch, which established its exact location.<sup>28</sup> Later UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon would warn that the use of cluster bombs could amount to a war crime.

Having bombed almost all military and security targets, the coalition warplanes started hitting civilian airports. This led the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to urge the coalition to stop targeting airports and sea ports in order to facilitate arrival of humanitarian aid into Yemen. The appeal fell on deaf ears.

Politically and diplomatically, it became crucial for the Saudis and their allies to return Hadi to Aden. Here the military of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), ordered by Crown Prince Muhammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, stepped into the breach. Along with the Saudi defence ministry, it planned an amphibious landing of a UAE brigade equipped with tanks, artillery and attack helicopters along the shores of Aden. On 14 July 2015—the day Iran’s nuclear deal was signed in Vienna—the Saudis and the Emiratis landed on the beaches of Aden. In less than a week, along with the local pro-Hadi forces equipped earlier with air-dropped arms, they succeeded in expelling most of the anti-Hadi forces from Aden. On 22 July the first aircraft to arrive at the reopened Aden airport was a Saudi military transporter, carrying aid and weapons.<sup>29</sup> By 26 July the Saudi-led coalition controlled all of Aden.

Coincidentally, that day King Salman led a contingent of 1,000 of his relatives, staff and military officials and their families for a three-week holiday, costing \$100 million. His destination was the sandy shore of Vallauris along the Mediterranean in the south of France. While the inner circles of Salman and his favorite son Muhammad occupied the monarch’s massive seafront mansion, around 700 guests stayed at lavish hotels in Cannes. The French authorities sealed off the beach to allow

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King Salman and the Deputy Crown Prince to holiday in private. Members of the public were barred from coming within 300 meters (985 feet) of the monarch's villa by sea. Scanning the sea, unobstructed, with his high powered binoculars, Bin Salman spotted a 440-foot yacht in the distance. He liked it instantly, and dispatched an aide to buy the vessel, called *Serene*, owned by Yuri Shefler, a Russian vodka tycoon. The deal was done within hours, at a price of 420 million euros (\$494 million), according to an investigative report by the *New York Times* in December 2017. Its source was a trove of records from 13.4 million files, leaked on 5 November 2017, originating with Appleby, a law firm in the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda, called the Paradise Papers. These disclosed the hidden secrets of some of the globe's richest individuals and corporations. Specifically, among other things these files showed how groups of lawyers, bankers and accountants in Germany, Bermuda and the Isle of Man worked fast to swiftly transfer ownership of the yacht to Eight Investment Company Limited. It was managed by Bader Al Asaker, head of Bin Salman's personal foundation.<sup>30</sup> The Russian seller packed and left soon after. This was a dramatic example of Bin Salman's impulsive nature, and his huge appetite for an obscenely luxurious lifestyle.

While the architects of the Saudi-led military charge indulged their fancies on the balmy shores of southern France, the focus of the ground fighting in Yemen turned to the southwestern province of Taiz along the Red Sea, with its southern most point overlooking the strategic Strait of Mandab, or *Bab al Mandab* (Arabic: Gate of Tears), and the oil-rich Marib Province east of Sanaa.

Simultaneously, using land routes from the Saudi Kingdom, the coalition built up military supplies in Safer at the farthest end of the dagger shaped Marib province. In August its massive military camp there was primed to use Marib as a staging post to expel the Houthis from Sanaa. But its plans went awry on 4 September. On that day the Houthis, controlling a fifth of the province, struck the coalition's Safer camp with a Soviet-era, short-range ballistic missile, and destroyed the arms depot, killing forty-five Emirati, ten Saudi and five Bahraini soldiers.<sup>31</sup> The incensed UAE government retaliated with a series of punishing attacks on enemy targets. But the coalition decided not to revive its earlier plans.

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The pouring of arms and ammunition by the Saudis, Emiratis and Kuwaitis into the Hadi camp contrasted sharply with the clandestine ways Iran replenished the much smaller arsenals of the anti-Hadi forces, since its arms deliveries were outlawed by the UN Security Council Resolution 2216. It resorted to using desert tracks in Oman to send its allies weapons after these had been smuggled across the narrow Strait of Hormuz by small sea vessels, or *dhow*s, into Omani territory.

The six-month deadline mentioned by Bin Salman to expel the Houthi-Saleh alliance from Sanaa ended in mid-September 2015 with no sign of success on the horizon. Even the arrival of Hadi in Aden during that month turned out to be a mere stop-over on his way to New York to address the UN General Assembly which recognized him as the Yemeni head of state. He returned not to Aden, but to Riyadh, where Bin Salman, who at first had flaunted his military leadership by meeting the generals in the field with the press in tow, had ceased to do so.

Bin Salman's failure in Yemen emboldened those royals, senior as well as junior, who disapproved of his egregiously luxurious lifestyle. One of them summarised his thoughts in Arabic, and posted them online in the form of open letters. Among the tens of thousands who read these documents was the Cairo-based journalist Hugh Miles, who is fluent in Arabic. He published a summary in the *Guardian* on 28 September. The first letter claimed that "The king is not in a stable condition and in reality the son of the king [Muhammad bin Salman] is ruling the kingdom." It referred to Bin Salman's spendthrift ways and reckless foreign policy, which included staging air raids "against a defenceless people" in Yemen. It called on the thirteen surviving sons of Ibn Saud—specifically Princes Talal, Turki and Ahmed—to unite and remove the leadership in a palace coup, before choosing a new government from within the royal family. The second document revealed that "Four or possibly five of my [the author's] uncles will meet soon to discuss the letters. They are making a plan with a lot of nephews and that will open the door. A lot of the second generation [of the House of Saud] is very anxious." The royal writer claimed to have received widespread support from both within the royal family and society at large. And yet only one other royal went on to publicly endorse his call for a palace coup.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, posting online letters of protest proved to be a sterile exercise. Removing a sitting monarch from the throne was a monu-

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mental task even when the king and his crown prince were engaged in an all out power struggle as was the case with King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal—as narrated in a previous chapter.<sup>33</sup> Four days earlier, on 24 September, the world’s attention turned to the worst ever stampede during the Stoning the Devil ritual of the Hajj pilgrimage in Mina.

### *Worst Hajj Disaster Fuels Iran’s Fury*

The stampede claimed 2,411 lives—as reported by the Associated Press, based on media reports and official comments from thirty-six of the over 180 countries that sent citizens to the Hajj—more than three times the official figure of 769.<sup>34</sup> It occurred when two waves of pilgrims traveling in opposite directions collided. The authorities’ failure to provide a credible explanation for the accident led to well-informed speculation. “Talking to pilgrims on the ground yesterday, the main reason for this accident was that the King in his palace in Mina was receiving [local and foreign] dignitaries, and for this reason they closed two entrances to where the stoning happens,” said Muhammad Jafari, an adviser to the London-based Hajj & Umrah Travel, in his interview with the BBC. “These were the two roads where people were not able to proceed. You have a stream of people going in and if you stop that stream, and the population builds up, eventually there is going to be an accident. It is the fault of the Saudi government because any time a prince comes along, they close the roads, they don’t think about the disaster waiting to happen.” The colliding waves contained pilgrims inter alia from Iran, Mali, Nigeria, and Egypt.<sup>35</sup>

With 464 deaths, Iran suffered the highest fatalities, followed by Mali (312), Nigeria (274) and Egypt (190). Tehran immediately called for an international Islamic fact-finding committee on the tragedy. King Salman ignored this proposal. Instead, he ordered Bin Nayef to conduct an inquiry and submit a report. In due course he did so. But this document would remain a state secret like many others. When Iran floated the idea of transferring the administration of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina from Saudi Arabia to some form of international Islamic stewardship, Riyadh was swift to dismiss it.<sup>36</sup>

In May 2016 the Saudi government announced that Iranians would be barred from the upcoming Hajj pilgrimage due in September

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because Iran had failed to sign an agreed Hajj memorandum of understanding (MOU) about logistics and security. Riyadh said that there was an agreement on it issuing electronic visas in the absence of Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran, adding that Tehran had made “unacceptable” demands, including the right to organise demonstrations “that would cause chaos”. On the eve of the Hajj pilgrimage, Ayatollah Ali Khamanei issued a most vitriolic condemnation of the House of Saud on his website. “Saudi rulers ... are disgraced and misguided people who think their survival on the throne of oppression is dependent on defending the arrogant powers of the world, on alliances with Zionism and the US,” he wrote. Accusing them of turning themselves into “small and puny Satans,” he stated that they “tremble for fear of jeopardizing the interests of the Great Satan (America)”, and added that “Because of Saudi rulers’ oppressive behavior towards God’s guests, the world of Islam must fundamentally reconsider the management of the two holy places and the issue of Hajj. ... The world of Islam, including Muslim governments and peoples, must familiarize themselves with the Saudi rulers and correctly understand their blasphemous, faithless, dependent and materialistic nature.”<sup>37</sup> The vehemence of Khamanei’s attack strengthened the hands of hard-liners among Saudi policymakers, such as Bin Salman.

Unlike the catastrophe of the last Hajj, the one in 2016 proved to be a tranquil affair. And, as Interior Minister, Bin Nayef took much deserved pride, hoping that his performance would help seal his position as heir to the throne.

### *Saudi Shias’ Protest Echoes in Iran*

Unsurprisingly, when pondering air strikes on the Shia Houthis in Yemen, neither of the two rivals at the top in Riyadh, being staunch Wahhabis, gave any thought to the implication of Saudi military intervention in Yemen on Shias in the Kingdom. The Saudi-led blitzkrieg, code-named Operation Decisive Storm, on the Houthis was denounced by Saudi Shias in the Eastern Province. Their earlier protest, ignited by the events in neighboring Bahrain in February–March 2011, subsided. Some months later the government started arresting Shia activists. That inflamed feelings among Shias. And in early October Saudi security forces fired live

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ammunition to disperse demonstrators in Awamiyah—a settlement of 30,000 Shias led by the richly bearded, white-turbaned Shaikh Nimr Baqr al Nimr, who carried the title of an ayatollah in the Shia religious hierarchy. While condemning the use of firearms on unarmed civilians, he declared that “The weapon of the word is stronger than the power of bullets.” He coupled his criticism of the House of Saud with a demand for parliamentary elections. Weekly protest marches occurred after Friday prayers in the Shia villages of the Qatif region. In late November–early December the security forces shot dead four young Shias. Their funerals turned into the biggest demonstrations the Eastern Province had witnessed in three decades. In early January, al Nimr denounced a list of twenty-three alleged activists published by the Ministry of Interior, and warned that the government would be overthrown if it continued its month-long crackdown against protesters.<sup>38</sup>

The authorities put al Nimr under 24/7 surveillance, with a police car trailing any vehicle in which he traveled. On 6 July when al Nimr was on his way from his farm to his brother’s house in Qatif, the police tried to arrest him and his co-passengers. In the altercation that followed, al Nimr was shot in the leg and arrested. Activists posted pictures on the Internet of a grey-bearded man they identified as Nimr inside a vehicle. He was covered with what appeared to be a blood-stained white sheet. In the subsequent protest demonstration, two participants were shot dead by the police. On 11 July thousands of Shias turned out for the funerals of the dead men. They carried Bahraini flags and chanted “Qatif and Bahrain are one people”, “Down with the House of Saud”, and “Down with Muhammad bin Fahd”, referring to the governor of the Eastern Province.<sup>39</sup>

Al Nimr was held for eight months before being charged with thirty-three offences, including “disobeying the ruler,” “inciting sectarian strife,” and, “encouraging, leading, and participating in demonstrations”. On 23 December 2013, his lawyer informed the Special Criminal Court that the defendant was unable to respond to the charges because he did not have a pen and paper. Neither his lawyer nor his family was informed prior to the last court session on 22 April 2014. On 15 October 2014, al Nimr was sentenced to death for “seeking ‘foreign meddling’ in [Saudi Arabia], ‘disobeying’ its rulers and taking up arms against the security forces”. After his appeal to the Appellate Court was rejected in March

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2015 leading Shia religious dignitaries from Iraq, Iran and Lebanon condemned the death sentence.

Shia Muslims all over the globe staged peaceful rallies and petitioned the UN Secretary-General to prevent al Nimr's execution. There were street demonstrations in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iran, India and Iraq. None of this mattered. On 25 October 2015, the Supreme Religious Court of Saudi Arabia upheld al Nimr's death sentence. Its ruling also applied to six other Shia activists. Along with Al Qaida terrorists, they were to be beheaded in a public square. Iran's deputy foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, warned in an interview on state television that "the execution of Sheikh Nimr would mean Saudi Arabia facing a heavy cost".<sup>40</sup> It was now left to King Salman to commute al Nimr's execution. That could happen only if a recommendation to that effect was made by the Interior Minister, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. That was most unlikely since, in his latent but real rivalry with Bin Salman, he could not afford to be seen to be a less fervent Wahhabi than his younger cousin. Regional tensions rose sharply on 2 January 2016 when the Saudi government added al Nimr and three other Shia dissidents to a batch of forty-three Al Qaida militants who had committed violent terrorist acts. The terrorists were beheaded, and the Shia dissidents were also executed. They were all buried in unmarked graves.

An enraged Khamanei tweeted, "This oppressed scholar had neither invited people to armed movement, nor was involved in covert plots. The only act of #SheikhNimr was outspoken criticism," adding that "the unfairly-spilled blood of oppressed martyr #SheikhNimr will affect rapidly and Divine revenge will seize Saudi politicians." While condemning Saudi Arabia's "medieval act of savagery" in executing al Nimr, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps predicted the "downfall" of the Saudi monarchy. Iran's foreign ministry summoned the Saudi charge d'affaires in Tehran in protest. And the Saudi foreign ministry lodged a complaint with the Iranian envoy in Riyadh about Tehran's "blatant interference" in the Kingdom's domestic affairs. Iranian newspapers strongly denounced the execution of al Nimr, with the reformist *Sharq* fearing that this "irresponsible" act could exacerbate sectarian tensions in the region, and advised the Iranian government not to get drawn into Riyadh's "dangerous game". On the other side, *Al Riyadh* declared that no "incitement of harm or sedition" should be tolerated

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irrespective of the culprit's affiliations. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Iraq called the execution an "unjust aggression". In Beirut, Hassan Nasrallah, leader of the Hizbollah movement, accused the House of Saud of trying to trigger a civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims across the world. In Washington, reflecting the views of President Obama, State Department spokesman John Kirby appealed to the Saudi government to respect and protect human rights, and ensure fair and transparent judicial proceedings. He urged it to permit peaceful expression of dissent and, along with other leaders in the region, redouble efforts to reduce regional tensions.<sup>41</sup>

Iran lost whatever high moral ground it gained because of the obduracy of the Saudi Kingdom when an enraged mob in Tehran attacked the Saudi Embassy, ransacked it and set alight a part of it. In response, Riyadh cut its diplomatic ties with Iran. The Hassan Rouhani government resorted to damage limitation. It sacked General Hassan Arabsorkhi, head of police Special Forces in Tehran, and Safar Ali Baratlou, a senior security official, for failing to stop the ransacking of the Saudi Embassy. It immediately arrested forty suspected rioters, with the total rising to 100 later on.<sup>42</sup> By then the long-ailing Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al Faisal was dead, and a commoner, Adel al Jubeir, was promoted to succeed him in July 2015. This provided Bin Salman increased leverage on deciding the policy that the Kingdom should follow in Syria's civil war. He opted to raise the stakes against Bashar Assad.

### *Bin Salman's Syria Move Goads Putin to Bolster Assad*

Once Obama had described Islamic State as America's number one enemy in June 2014, his administration's interest in toppling Assad waned. He urged the Gulf States to aid the Iraqi government by sending combat troops to Iraq. They ignored his call. By late 2014 it had dawned on US policy-makers that the only realistic alternative to Assad was a regime dominated by jihadist extremists. Little wonder then that Obama's \$500 million program for the training of opposition fighters committed to creating a democratic polity in Syria, conceived in mid-2014, made little progress. The number of volunteers, carefully vetted, was small, with the State Department insisting that they fight ISIS as the primary enemy.

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This was disappointing news for the Saudis who complained that the Obama White House, needing the support of Iran against ISIS in Iraq, and hopeful of an accord over its nuclear program, was losing interest in removing Iran's client regime in Damascus. In the region Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed with Riyadh's interpretation during his meeting with King Salman in Riyadh on 2 March 2015. They resolved that a strong, coordinated initiative must come from the regional powers to oust Assad. Bin Salman was only too willing to give Riyadh an enhanced profile in Syria's civil war. The result was the creation of the Jaish al Fatah, or the Army of Victory, a command structure for seven jihadist groups in Syria, on 24 March under the leadership of a Saudi cleric Abdullah al Muhaysini. They included Jabhat al Nusra, an affiliate of Al Qaida, and Ahrar al Sham, which shared Al Qaida's Salafi ideology. Together these two groups contributed nearly 90 per cent of the fighters in Jaish al Fatah. This coalition proved very effective.

Riyadh financed the purchase of CIA-procured TOW anti-tank missiles, which largely powered a rebel offensive against Assad in the summer. Jaish al Fatah made inroads into regime-held territory, capturing Idlib and other towns and villages in the province adjoining Turkey. The Nusra Front provided over 3,000 battle-hardened fighters for the offensive which put the insurgents in a position to launch an offensive against Latakia, the bastion of the Assad regime.<sup>43</sup> This unnerved the government in Damascus.

In the face of intensified battering by the opposition, Syria's military and its auxiliary militia, the National Defence Forces, found themselves increasingly short of manpower. Evading call-up had become commonplace, with the number of absentees put at 70,000 by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Deaths, defections and draft-dodging had cut the Syrian military, 300,000 strong in March 2011, by half. Of the estimated 230,000 people killed in the war more than a third were soldiers and their supporting militiamen. This was the backdrop against which Assad conceded in a televised address to a select audience in the capital on 25 July 2015 that his army had been forced to abandon some areas in order to retain others in the war.<sup>44</sup> Apparently, the reinforcements sent by Iran and the Lebanese Hizbollah had proved inadequate to cover the shortfall in manpower.

Assad appealed to Russia for urgent military assistance, as did the Iranian government. The Russian President Vladimir Putin was resolved

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not to let the Syrian regime collapse, and see the Kremlin lose its last foothold on the Mediterranean coast at Tartus. Russia's military planners decided to fill the gaping hole left by Syria's threadbare air force, shore up its air defences, and boost its depleted arsenal of tanks and armored vehicles. To do this, they turned one of Russia's footholds on a foreign soil, Khmeimim (also spelled Hmeimim) airbase near the port of Latakia, into a forward operating base, in mid-September, and shipped to it warplanes, attack helicopters, tanks, artillery, and armored personnel carriers. The Kremlin also deployed its most advanced S-400 surface-to-air missiles there.<sup>45</sup> Putin ruled out sending combat troops to Syria. Officially Russia's military intervention in the Syrian civil war started on 30 September 2015. And its peak, about 5,000 Russian air force personnel would be involved.

In coordination with the pro-Assad ground forces, Russian warplanes bombed the targets of ISIS and the jihadist constituents of Jaish al Fatah. By the end of 2015, the battlefield scene started to shift in Assad's favor chiefly because the opposition fighters lacked anti-aircraft missiles. Their foreign backers could not supply them these weapons in the face of unremitting opposition from Obama. He argued that once the Syrian rebel factions came to possess these missiles they could fall into the hands of jihadist terrorists who would end up targeting civilian aircraft to a devastating effect.

Over the past few years United Nations' attempt at peace-making in Syria had failed mainly because, at the insistence of Saudi Arabia, Iran was excluded from multilateral talks. After the collapse of two such conferences in Geneva, the third UN-sponsored peace conference was scheduled in Geneva on 29 January 2016. In order to forge a powerful anti-Assad front, Bin Salman, working with Jubeir, convened a conference of all opposition groups, except the Nusra Front, on 10 December. King Salman welcomed the delegates in Riyadh. Two days later the attendees issued a communiqué which called on Assad to step down at the start of a "transitional period." It backed a "democratic mechanism through a pluralistic regime that represents all sectors of the Syrian people which would not discriminate on religious, sectarian or ethnic grounds" The delegates of Ahrar al Sham—a 20,000-strong Islamist militia—walked out when their argument that there could be no final settlement without the post-Assad state basing itself on the

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Sharia law was rejected by most of the participating political factions.<sup>46</sup> In any case, the subsequent UN-sponsored peace conference in Geneva failed when the Syrian government delegates rejected the idea of Assad stepping down before the setting up of a transitional authority.

In the final analysis, talks at a negotiating table reflect the balance of force on the battlefield. There, boosted by overt Russian military involvement along with increased backing to the Syrian infantry by Iran and the Lebanese Hizbollah, the Assad government made steady gains. By September 2016, most major Syrian cities were back in government hands, and rebel-held eastern Aleppo was under attack.

On the diplomatic front, following Russia's forceful intervention in Syria, the region's balance of power shifted. Between October 2015 and August 2016, top officials from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Turkey held talks with Putin. The first to do so, in October, was Bin Salman. He and Putin met at the Russian president's dacha in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. The two agreed that they shared the common goal of preventing "a terrorist caliphate [ISIS] from getting the upper hand." When Jubeir mentioned his concern about the rebel groups the Russians were targeting, Putin expressed readiness to share intelligence, which meant future cooperation between their militaries and security services.<sup>47</sup> Later that day, Sheikh Muhammad Al Nahyan, the deputy supreme commander of the UAE's armed forces, called on Putin. "I can say that Russia plays a very serious role in Middle Eastern affairs," he stated, adding that, "There is no doubt that we have a privileged relationship [with it]." The ruler of Qatar, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, went a step further after meeting Putin at the Kremlin in January 2016: "Russia plays a main role when it comes to stability in the world." Along with Jordan, Qatar had been providing the CIA with bases for training and arming anti-Assad insurgents. A month later, the next Gulf chief to call on Putin in Sochi was King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa of Bahrain, which has hosted the US Navy's Fifth Fleet since 1971. He presented a "victory sword" of Damascene steel to the Russian leader. After their talks, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reported that the two countries had agreed to boost economic and military ties.<sup>48</sup>

On 9 August, Turkish President Erdogan flew to St Petersburg to meet "my dear friend" Putin. Their relations had fallen to a low point

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when the Turks shot down a Russian warplane over northern Syria in November 2015. But on the following 15 July, Putin was the first foreign leader to call Erdogan to congratulate him on aborting an attempted military coup—something no Western leader did. “We are always categorically opposed to any attempts at anti-constitutional activity,” Putin explained after three hours of talks with Erdogan.<sup>49</sup> By so doing, he inadvertently offered an explanation for his earlier unqualified backing for the constitutional Syrian government of Assad. Erdogan and Putin agreed to mend their strained economic relations. In a striking reversal, Erdogan stopped calling on Assad to step down.

In practice, his gesture had no significance for the Syrian president. As it happened, around this time he was planning a bold move in the war.

### *Assad’s Recapture of Eastern Aleppo, a Turning Point*

In early September, Assad’s government decided to retake rebel-held eastern Aleppo, containing a quarter of a million civilians (compared to 1.5 million in government-controlled western Aleppo), in coordination with Iraq and Iran. Consequently, over 1,000 Iraqi Shia militants traveled from Iraq to the suburbs of Aleppo to join another 4,000 Shia fighters, trained by Iran, already there. Together they formed half of the Assad regime’s ground force of 10,000.<sup>50</sup> The Syrian army’s offensive started on 22 September and was coordinated with the Russian air force. It gained about a sixth of eastern Aleppo.

Determined to retain their hold over the highly symbolic urban territory of Aleppo, rebel commanders forbade civilians from fleeing at pain of death in order to inhibit the devastating air raids by Russian warplanes. But Assad was hell-bent on retaking eastern Aleppo. In his interview with Daria Aslamova of the Moscow-based tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda*<sup>51</sup> on 12 October, he talked of “cleaning” the besieged Aleppo. “It’s going to be the springboard, as a big city, to move to other areas, to liberate other areas from the terrorists. This is the importance of Aleppo now,” he said. It would provide important political and strategic gains for his regime, he added. He revealed that early on the Saudis told him: “If you move away from Iran and you announce that you disconnect all kinds of relations with Iran, we’re going to help you. Very simple and very straight to the point.”<sup>52</sup> Among other things

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this showed Saudi rulers' failure to grasp the length and depth of Damascus-Tehran ties dating back to the 1979 revolution in Iran. They were so used to practising cheque-book diplomacy that they could not comprehend that there were certain loyalties, based on deep-rooted national interests, which could not be bought with cash.

In eastern Aleppo, the insurgent fighters, estimated to number 8,000 to 10,000, were retreating or giving up more readily than had been expected. Saudi Arabia and Qatar could not come to their rescue with arms and ammunition for logistical and diplomatic reasons. Their supply lines were severed by Syrian troops, and Turkey had adopted a neutral stance in the civil war. Little wonder that the government forces broke through the enemy's defensive lines and advanced rapidly to capture all but 5 per cent of eastern Aleppo by 13 December 2016. With UN mediation, a ceasefire was announced to allow the evacuation of civilians and rebels. But it lasted only a day. It was revived on 15 December. During the next week, 34,000 civilians and rebel fighters were bussed out to rebel-held territory in the countryside west of Aleppo and in Idlib province. On 22 December the Syrian army declared that it had retaken full control of Aleppo. "This victory represents a strategic change and a turning point in the war against terrorism on the one hand and crushing blow to the terrorists' project on the other," read its statement. In Moscow, Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that since September 2015 its warplanes had carried out 18,800 sorties, and had "liquidated 725 training camps, 405 weapon factories and workshops, 1,500 pieces of terrorist equipment, and 35,000 fighters."<sup>53</sup>

In his *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Assad said that "What we've been seeing recently during the last few weeks, and maybe few months, is something like more than Cold War [between Russia and the West]. I don't know what to call it, but it's not something that has existed recently, because I don't think that the West and especially the United States has stopped their Cold War, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union."<sup>54</sup>

Assad's observation was imprecise. The relationship between Russia and the West is best described as competition in some areas and cooperation in others. For instance, Russia had consistently worked with the West on the issue of Iran's nuclear project, agreeing fully that Tehran must not be allowed to build an atomic bomb. And along with five

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other global powers it had left it to the United States to negotiate the thorny points with Iran while continuing to complete its contract with the Islamic Republic to build a civilian nuclear power plant under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The end result was the signing of the 109-page Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on 14 July 2015. It had taken an inordinately long time to materialise, however.

### *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*

In April 2014 the IAEA said that Iran had neutralised half of its 20 per cent enriched uranium stockpile as agreed in the Joint Plan of Action of November 2013. Four months later the sixth and final round of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group started in Vienna, but failed to meet the November 2014 deadline for the final deal. Extended negotiations revealed differences among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Russia tilted toward Iran whereas France insisted on a robust deal with detailed checks. China urged all sides to meet one another halfway. And the United States, after threatening to walk away on 30 March 2015 if current negotiations failed to yield a political framework accord, was once again at the center of the talks.

The bottom line for the US and five other powers—Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia—had been to keep Iran at least one year away from being able to produce enough nuclear fuel for a single weapon. A year was universally considered enough warning time to prevent an Iranian race for an atom bomb by re-imposing tight economic pressure or, if need be, to stage a few bombing raids by the Pentagon. The hard-knuckle bargaining that marked high-level negotiations over several days at the Swiss resort of Lausanne centered chiefly around three contentious points: the length of restrictions on Tehran's nuclear program within the general agreement; the pace or modality of lifting UN sanctions on Iran; and the penalty for Iran in case of its non-compliance with the agreed protocol. Iran wanted the life of the agreement to be ten years with restrictions on its nuclear program to apply over that period. The six global powers favored fifteen years. They wished to extend the limitations on Tehran for a further five years on the assumption that, with

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advanced centrifuges available to Iran, its break-out time to produce an atom bomb would be reduced. Iran's leaders rejected prolonged curbs on their centrifuge development, arguing that would make their country dependent on foreign technology.

On the modality of lifting UN sanctions on Iran, Ayatollah Khamanei outlined his position, on 30 March, with his website message saying that "sanctions must be lifted in one go, not as a result of future Iranian actions." He seemed to take on board the open letter that 47 US Republican Senators addressed to him on 9 March, warning that "The next president [after Barack Obama] could revoke such an executive agreement with the stroke of a pen, and future Congresses could modify the terms of the agreement at any time." Foreign Minister Muhammad Zarif, head of Iran's negotiating team, described the letter as a propaganda ploy, adding that revocation by a future US administration would violate international law. None the less, this would happen when on 13 October 2017, US President Donald Trump refused to certify that Iran was complying with all the terms of the agreement, a precondition for the suspension of sanctions by Washington—something he was required to do every 120 days according to US law.<sup>55</sup> In the spring of 2015, President Obama found it "somewhat ironic" to see some members of US Congress form "an unusual coalition" to make common cause with the hardliners in Iran. Actually, these hardliners had been quiet, noting Khamanei's repeated backing for the Iranian negotiators.

According to the latest *Washington Post*-ABC News poll, 59 per cent backed an agreement in which the United States and its negotiating partners lifted major economic sanctions in exchange for restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, with 31 per cent opposing a deal.<sup>56</sup>

Well aware of the anxiety that Saudi Arabia and other members of the GCC had about lifting sanctions on Iran, Obama hosted a one-day GCC summit at Camp David on 14 May 2015. He gave them a preview of the international agreement that was being finalised in Switzerland. He pledged Washington's continued cooperation in addressing Tehran's "destabilizing activities in the region," and reiterated that Washington would side with GCC partners against an external attack. He also assured Gulf rulers that that his administration was seeking only a "transaction" with Tehran on the nuclear issue and not a "broader rapprochement". He offered active assistance in forging a region-wide

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anti-missile defence system under central command to abort Iran's missile attacks.<sup>57</sup> Separately, a week later, much to the Saudis' satisfaction, the Republican-majority US House of Representatives passed a resolution barring Obama from waiving or suspending US sanctions on Iran until the end of his term on 20 January 2017.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, the hard-nosed bargaining between Iran and the six world powers that followed in Lausanne went beyond the deadline of 30 June to end two weeks later with an agreement, to become effective on 18 October. Yukiya Amano, the IAEA director general, signed a separate "roadmap" agreement with Tehran, requiring the agency to resolve any outstanding concerns by the end of 2015.

Of its nearly 20,000 centrifuges, used to separate out the most fissile isotope U-235, at its Natanz and Fardow facilities, Iran was allowed to run only 5,060 of the oldest and least efficient machines at Natanz for ten years. Iran's current uranium stockpile was to be reduced by 98 per cent to 300 kg (660lbs) for fifteen years, and it had to keep its level of enrichment at 3.67 per cent suitable as fuel for nuclear power plants. Research and development will be permitted only at Natanz for eight years. The Fardow facility will be converted to a nuclear, physics and technology center. Its 1,044 centrifuges will produce radioisotopes for use in medicine, agriculture, industry and science. As for the Arak heavy water plant in the making, following its dismantling, Iran agreed not to redesign its reactor in a way that it could produce weapons-grade fuel. All spent fuel will be shipped out of the Islamic Republic during the lifetime of the reactor. On the highly contentious issue of IAEA's access to military sites, there was compromise. IAEA inspectors will be able to request visits to such sites with the proviso that access was not guaranteed and could be delayed. In return, all restrictions on Iranian banks will cease; Iran's \$100 billion overseas assets, held mainly in banks in China, India, Japan, South Korea and Turkey and frozen since 2012 under sanctions, will be released after the IAEA has closed its Iran file satisfactorily; the oil embargoes, financial restrictions and trade restrictions imposed by the UN (but not the United States) will be waived; the UN arms embargo will end after five years; and most limitations on Tehran's current nuclear activities will cease after 2025.<sup>59</sup> Iran accepted that sanctions would be snapped back if an eight-member panel determined by a majority vote that it was violating the deal.<sup>60</sup>

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The final closing of the IAEA's file on its decade-long nuclear probe on Iran would occur on 15 December 2015.

The peaceful end to the twelve-year standoff over Iran's nuclear program, an international landmark, was welcomed instantly in world capitals, except Tel Aviv and Riyadh. Iranian state television announced that Khamanei had voiced his "appreciation and thanked the Iranian nuclear negotiators for their honest and diligent efforts."<sup>61</sup> As news of the final agreement reached Tehran early on 14 July, there were public celebrations in the streets. Prior to that many Iranians spent hours glued to their televisions which aired speeches by Rouhani and Obama. "Suddenly we saw Barack Obama on the Islamic Republic Television station in a live broadcast," said Mahin, a fifty-eight-year-old retired teacher. "Just imagine Iran broadcasting a live speech by the president of the Great Satan." Sadeh Zibakalam, a leading political scientist, compared the JCPOA to three earlier turning points in the Islamic Republic's history: the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979; the start of the Iraq war in 1980; and the 1997 election of reformist President Muhammad Khatami, which galvanised the public demand for greater social and political freedoms.<sup>62</sup>

In New York, the UN Security Council endorsed the JCPOA on 22 July 2015. And ninety days later came the official Adoption Date of 18 October. Globally, the leading winners were Rouhani, Obama and Putin; and the foremost losers were Salman, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the self-proclaimed Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Rouhani claimed that his country's right to develop peaceful nuclear energy had secured international recognition, and its isolation from the West had ended. "This deal demonstrates that American diplomacy can bring about real and meaningful change," said Obama. "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." The JCPOA vindicated what many considered to be the premature awarding of a Nobel peace prize to him in 2009. Assad hailed the deal as a "major turning point" in the history of Iran, the region and the world, calling it a "great victory". Tehran's enhanced regional position in the wake of this agreement was set to strengthen its demand for recognition as a key player in the Middle East, including negotiations about the future of Syria. Putin declared that the world had "breathed a huge sigh of relief" when the deal was finalised.<sup>63</sup>

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In sharp contrast, Riyadh's initial silence about the JCPOA indicated deep anxiety about a rapprochement between Washington and Tehran. According to Prime Minister Netanyahu, lifting sanctions gave "Iran a jackpot, a cash bonanza of hundreds of billions of dollars, which will enable it to continue to pursue its aggression and terror in the region and in the world". In the capital of ISIS, al Baghdadi feared enhanced pressure on his forces following fresh options for cooperation between America and Iran.<sup>64</sup>

Five days before the JCPOA's adoption date, Iran's parliament passed the bill approving it. The vote, taken after sharp exchanges between the opposing sides, was 161 in favor and 59 against, with 13 abstentions.<sup>65</sup> Following the IAEA's certification that Iran had done what was required under the deal on 15 December 2015, the EU was set to adopt a regulation for the lifting of sanctions and President Obama to issue waivers for sanctions. This would happen on 22 January 2016.

In keeping with his word to the Saudi monarch during their September 2015 meeting, President Obama approved the sale of PAC-3 (Patriot Advanced Capability) surface-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia. Such a step was required by a law passed by Congress in 2008 to ensure that Israel continued to maintain a "qualitative military edge" over its traditional adversaries in the Middle East. All weapons sales to the Middle East were, therefore, weighed on how they will affect Israel's military superiority.<sup>66</sup> The Obama administration had concluded that since Gulf monarchies considered Iran as much of a threat to their survival as Israel, allowing them to purchase advanced US weaponry aided Israel's security. In October the Saudi government signed an agreement with the Obama administration for the purchase of 320 Patriot PAC-3 missiles produced by Lockheed Martin Corporation.<sup>67</sup> And the following month the US authorized the \$1.29 billion sale of precision munitions for the Saudi Kingdom specifically meant to replenish stocks used in Yemen.<sup>68</sup> The Obama administration was keen to minimise civilian casualties in the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen.

### *The Saudis' Quick-fix Strategy in Yemen Gets Bogged Down*

The Saudi-led coalition's indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets had damaged 39 hospitals, including one run by Medecins Sans Frontieres

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(MSF), in Saada province on 27 October 2015. “This attack is another illustration of a complete disregard for civilians in Yemen where bombings have become a daily routine,” said Hassan Boucenine, head of the group’s mission in Yemen.<sup>69</sup>

This was the background against which President Hadi was flown to Aden in mid-November and lodged in the presidential palace. It was in the intensifying clashes between the two sides in the adjoining Taiz Province, on 14 December, that the Houthis hit a Saudi military camp, as mentioned above.<sup>70</sup> A report by United Press International (UPI) said that the dead included fifteen to forty employees of Blackwater, a US private security firm renamed Academi since 2011.<sup>71</sup> By then the UAE had hired 400 Eritrean and 450 predominantly Colombian mercenaries to serve as a protection force for its combat troops in Aden after training them to handle grenade launchers and armored vehicles.<sup>72</sup> This was one of the several unintended consequences of Saudi Arabia’s military intervention in Yemen.

The deadly missile attack occurred a day before the start of a week-long ceasefire between the warring sides, during which they reportedly exchanged hundreds of prisoners, on the eve of peace talks.<sup>73</sup> These were held in the Swiss village of Macolin near Berne under the chairmanship of the UN’s special envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. Soon after the opening session a spokesman for the forces loyal to Saleh said that the port of Hodeidah was bombarded by the coalition’s naval vessels during the agreed week-long ceasefire. On 18 December the Houthi-Saleh delegates declared that they would resume talks only after the UN had condemned the Hadi government’s breach of the truce. That did not happen. That led Ahmed to “suspend” the talks indefinitely.<sup>74</sup>

In January 2016 the UN-appointed panel of experts reported that the Saudi-led coalition had targeted civilians with air strikes in a “widespread and systematic” manner. It documented 119 coalition sorties that violated international law, many of which involved multiple strikes on such civilian objects as schools, health facilities, wedding parties and camps for the displaced. In addition, it found that civilians fleeing coalition air raids had been chased and shot at by helicopters. It concluded that civilians were also being deliberately starved as a war tactic, and called for an investigation into human rights abuses by the coalition.<sup>75</sup>

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On 27 February, a coalition air strike hit a busy market in Khulqut Nihm, twenty miles north of Sanaa, killing thirty people. Video footage depicting the aftermath of the attack showed incinerated bodies, including children, along with dead sheep and rubble. An eye witness said that there was no apparent military target in or near the market.<sup>76</sup>

The Saudis were nowhere near achieving their goals of expelling the Houthi-Saleh forces from Sanaa, handing over the capital to Hadi, and containing the Houthis in the north. On the contrary, the rebels were so firmly rooted in the capital that they invited in Western correspondents to see for themselves. "At a police station in Sanaa, Yemeni security officials put a US-made cluster bomb unit on display," reported Orla Guerin of the BBC. "They claim it was dropped in the western suburbs in January 2016 scattering deadly bomblets over a civilian area. They produced several [bomblets] from a pink plastic shopping bag. The coalition has denied using the weapons, which have been banned by more than 100 countries."<sup>77</sup>

Around this time two correspondents of the *New York Times* provided an explanation as to why the coalition's air strikes continued to hit civilian sites. Fearful of enemy ground fire, the inexperienced Saudi pilots flew at high altitudes to avoid being hit. But this reduced the accuracy of their bombing and increased damage to civilian property and life. "We offer them coaching [in flying low but safely], but ultimately it's their operation," said General Carl E. Mundy, the deputy commander of Marines in the Middle East.<sup>78</sup>

Tension remained high along the Yemeni-Saudi border. When subjected to punishing air raids by the coalition's jets, Houthi-Saleh partisans responded with indiscriminate shelling of the Saudi territory adjacent to Yemen, making the area insecure for civilians. This drove the tribal leaders on both sides of the border to alleviate the increasingly unbearable situation. Using their prestige in their respective communities they managed to act as mediators between the Houthis and the Saudi government. They arranged the exchange of seven Houthi prisoners for a captured Saudi officer on 8 March after a week of secret preparatory talks. The reports of Houthi delegates arriving in Saudi Arabia to discuss larger prisoner exchanges were not acknowledged officially in Riyadh. Nonetheless these enabled Bin Salman and Jubair to reassure US Secretary of State, John Kerry, during their meeting

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with him at King Khalid Military City, that their government supported the efforts of the UN Special Envoy to bring all parties to the negotiating table in pursuit of a peaceful political transition in Yemen.<sup>79</sup>

As before, the warring camps agreed to a week long ceasefire starting on 10 April before the start of the UN-brokered talks, this time in Kuwait, which remained part of the Saudi-led coalition. Earlier, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that during the year-long conflict over 6,200 people had been killed and 30,000 wounded, and that more than 21 million Yemenis—82 per cent of the population—were in need of humanitarian aid.<sup>80</sup>

The UN-sponsored negotiations dragged on for more than three months. The only tangible outcome was the two aides agreeing to hand over half of the prisoners they held. As a consequence, in mid-June, Houthi and pro-Hadi forces exchanged nearly 200 prisoners in Taiz.<sup>81</sup> Most of the inconclusive discussion between the warring parties, focusing on the type of government to run Yemen during a transition period, proved sterile. The main stumbling-block was the status of Hadi who insisted on retaining his presidency until fresh elections were held under a new constitution.

Feeling frustrated at the stalled talks, on 28 July the Houthi-Saleh camp announced the formation of an alternative government under the title of the High Political Council. It had ten members divided equally between the Houthis and the General People's Congress (GPC) to manage the country's affairs in all political, military, economic and administrative areas on the basis of the existing constitution. So far the Houthis had been supervising regions they controlled through a Revolutionary Committee with the GPC's participation. The UN Special Envoy declared that the move violated Security Council Resolution 2216, which called on the Houthis "to refrain from further unilateral actions that could undermine the political transition in Yemen."<sup>82</sup> This was the third failed attempt by the UN to end Yemen's civil war.

Overall, the Houthi-Saleh alliance administered most of Yemen's northern half while Hadi's forces shared control of the rest with Southern separatists and various tribes—with AQAP jihadists operating in the south-east with impunity because of the intensified violence between the two principal antagonists. For all practical purposes the

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territorial situation reverted to what it had been before the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990.

### *Riyadh's Mounting Toll of Civilian Casualties in Yemen*

A report by the Yemen Data Project, a group of academics and human rights activists, analysed 8,600 Saudi-led air attacks between March 2015 and the end of August 2016. Of these, 3,577 were listed as having hit military sites and 3,158 such non-military sites as schools, hospitals, markets, mosques, culture centers, camps for displaced persons, poultry farms, bridges, power plants, airports, seaports, and factories producing potato chips, yogurt, tea, paper tissues, ceramics, cement, and Coca-Cola. And 1,882 incidents were listed as “unknown” when a hit site could not be classified as military or civilian. The survey listed 942 attacks on residential areas, 114 on markets, 34 on mosques, 147 on school buildings, 26 on universities and 378 on transport. The records updated to the end of September showed 356 air strikes targeting farms, 174 hitting markets, and 61 targeting food storage sites.<sup>83</sup>

Responding to the most comprehensive survey by an independent body, Jubeir said that the Houthis had “turned schools and hospitals and mosques into command and control centers. They have turned them into weapons depots in a way that they are no longer civilian targets.” His statement could not explain why a school building in Dhubab in Taiz Province was hit nine times and a market in Sirwah in Marib Province twenty-four times, as reported by the Yemen Data Project.<sup>84</sup>

On 8 October the coalition’s air strike at a funeral hall hosting the wake of Ali al Rawishan, father of the Houthi-appointed Interior Minister Gawal al Rawishan in Sanaa, set a record. It killed more than 140 people, and injured 525 others. The casualties included senior military and security officials of the Houthi-Saleh alliance. “The place has been turned into a lake of blood,” said Murad Tawfiq, one of the rescuers collecting in sacks hundreds of body parts strewn in and around the building. The carnage drew strong condemnation not only from the UN but also the European Union and the US. While acknowledging the Saudi-led coalition’s responsibility for the deadly air assault, its spokesman attributed it to “faulty intelligence”.<sup>85</sup>

The funeral hall atrocity tipped Washington’s stance from strong support for the coalition’s campaign and restoration of Hadi’s presi-

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dency toward a more nuanced approach. “US security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check,” said NSC spokesman Ned Price. “In light of this and other recent incidents, we have initiated an immediate review of our already significantly reduced support to the Saudi-led Coalition and are prepared to adjust our support so as to better align with US principles, values and interests, including achieving an immediate and durable end to Yemen’s tragic conflict.” His reference to “already significantly reduced” US support for Riyadh probably referred to the withdrawal in June of many American personnel assigned to a joint US-Saudi planning cell established to coordinate the provision of military and intelligence support for the campaign. Clarifying the current position, White House press secretary Josh Earnest said on 12 October that “this [US] assistance that we provide is primarily logistical support. We do share some intelligence with them, but the United States does not do targeting for them.”<sup>86</sup> It was important for the White House to stress that it had nothing to do with a string of targets that clearly violated international law.

A week before the UN Security Council’s discussion of Yemen on 31 October, the UN Envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, presented a road map to peace. It consisted of turning the presidency into a ceremonial post, forming a national unity government, a phased removal of the Houthi-Saleh forces from the cities captured by them in 2014 and 2015 under UN supervision, and gradually moving toward presidential and parliamentary elections. To Washington’s annoyance, Hadi rejected the plan since it required his virtual abdication. On its part, the Houthi-Saleh alliance sought Hadi’s immediate resignation and the formation of a unity government with a significant role for it. Riyadh demanded that the Houthi-Saleh alliance must hand over their heavy weapons to a third party, and sought a guarantee that a unity government would prohibit the deployment of weapons that could threaten Saudi territory or international waterways.<sup>87</sup>

In late November, an eye witness account of the Saudi-led coalition’s devastation of Yemen’s civilian infrastructure in the Houthi-Saleh-controlled territory was provided by Ben Hubbard of the *New York Times*. Brig. Gen. Sharaf Luqman, a spokesman for Houthi-allied military units, talked to Hubbard in his car because the Defence Ministry headquarters had been bombed. “We have lost everything, our infra-

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structure, and we have nothing left to lose,” he said. “Now it is a long war of attrition.” Many ministry buildings were badly damaged by the coalition, and those still standing were virtually empty, their employees staying home. They did so out of fear of being bombed and also because they had not received their salaries since September. To tackle the problem the Houthis had resorted to appointing their activists as supervisors over the civil servants and policemen who reported for work. The territory administered by the Houthi-Saleh alliance contained members of many Sunni tribes. It seemed that Riyadh’s military intervention had helped unify diverse Yemeni elements against a common foe. “What brought the [multi-sectarian] army together with Ansar Allah [God’s Helpers]?” asked Tariq Muhammad, a policeman in the town of Hajjah, using the official name for the Houthis. “The aggression against the country: that is what caused us to come together as one hand.” Given this, Houthi-Saleh loyalists were very much in control of the area they had seized. “During our 10-day trip to Sanaa and nearby provinces, it was clear that the Houthis were in charge,” reported Hubbard. “Their authorities issued our visas, determined what sites we could visit and assigned us a minder to make sure we stuck to the program. Houthi checkpoints dotted the roads, sometimes less than a mile apart... While this slowed traffic, Houthi security measures have put a stop to the suicide bombings and assassinations that used to be frequent in the capital, perhaps their greatest achievement in governing.”<sup>88</sup>

The overarching strategy of the Houthi-Saleh alliance was in essence defensive, to survive against all odds with the much-coveted Sanaa as its capital. It faced an acute banking crisis when, on 18 September, Hadi ordered the Central Bank governor to move the bank from Sanaa to Aden after accusing the Houthi-Saleh alliance of adding thousands of militiamen to the Ministry of Defence’s payroll, consuming \$100 million a month in foreign reserves. All through the turmoil dating back to early 2011, the Central Bank, capable of stabilizing the economy and receiving foreign currencies, had functioned normally. It paid salaries regularly to 1.2 million civil servants and soldiers, thereby sustaining a quarter of the population. After the relocation of the bank, the Hadi government promised to cover the salaries of only those public workers who were employed before September 2014 when Houthis cap-

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tured Sanaa. In practice this did not happen. On the other side, to meet the financial crisis, the Houthi-Saleh government set up its own central bank, ordered the authorities in their controlled territory to send their revenues from taxes and fees to it, cut the salaries of its employees by half, and appealed to citizens to donate funds to the bank while creating a system whereby people could donate Yemeni rials by text messages from their mobile phones.<sup>89</sup>

Meanwhile, the mounting civilian deaths in Yemen started to weigh heavily on the Obama administration. In mid-December 2016 it blocked the sale of some 16,000 guided munitions kits, used to upgrade dumb bombs to smart bombs that can more accurately hit targets, by Raytheon Corporation. In addition, the White House decided to curtail some intelligence sharing with Riyadh which could potentially lead to even more civilian casualties.<sup>90</sup> Riyadh drew comfort from the fact that the navies of several Western nations interdicted weapons caches bound for the Houthi-Saleh alliance. American officials said in October 2015 that US Navy ships had interdicted five Iranian arms shipments bound for Yemen. In late February an Australian ship interdicted a dhow bound for the Somali port of Caluula used as a transit point for shipments to Yemen. Its cargo included 2,000 AK-47 assault rifles, and various machine guns. Another interdiction by a French ship on 20 March revealed a cargo of more than 2,000 assault rifles. And eight days later USS *Sirocco* interdicted a dhow carrying 1,500 assault rifles and 200 rocket launchers. The weapons pipeline outline by the London-based Conflict Armament Research, funded by the EU, showed flows from Iran to a few small transshipment ports in the semi-autonomous Puntland region of the Somalia coast. From these ports, contraband is picked up by small vessels bound for other ports in Somalia or Yemen.<sup>91</sup>

The US Navy's press release of 5 April 2016 noted that for the third time in recent weeks, American and other international naval forces operating in the Arabian Sea had seized illicit shipments of weapons originating in Iran for delivery to the Houthi-Saleh forces in Yemen via Somalia. The arms caches included AK-47 assault rifles, sniper rifles, general purpose machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, mortar tubes, and anti-tank missiles.<sup>92</sup> Iran's denials do not carry much weight. Noticing that the Houthi-Saleh alliance was being squeezed on

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different fronts, it was politically incumbent on Tehran to show that it stood by the anti-Saudi forces in their hour of acute need. To its satisfaction, Saudi Arabia faced intensifying international criticism for the ongoing military intervention in Yemen led by it. Along with continuing reports of civilian casualties and displacement were the persistent shortages of food, medicine, and water suffered by ordinary Yemenis, the unexpectedly high resilience of the Houthi-Saleh alliance, and the advances made by AQAP and the local branch of ISIS.



## TRUMP FUELS GULF RIVALS' COLD WAR

2017 opened a chapter when the attention of those living in America as well as elsewhere turned to the successor of President Barack Hussein Obama: Donald John Trump.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in American history, its chief executive in Washington was a businessman, a real estate tycoon, who had never before served as an elected official, and was a novice in public affairs, particularly in the field of international relations. In office he turned out to be thoroughly undisciplined with no patience or interest in learning, refusing to read briefing papers, and firing off tweets on Twitter, jumping wildly from subject to subject, fight to fight, depending on what he had seen on news broadcasts on cable TV.<sup>2</sup>

### *A Demagogic Populist Wins the White House*

On 7 December 2015, Donald Trump called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.” He had previously proposed surveillance against mosques and said that he was open to the idea of establishing a database for all Muslims living in America. His campaign manager Corey Lewandowski told CNN that the ban would apply not just to Muslim foreigners looking to immigrate to the US, but also to Muslims looking to visit the US as tourists. “Everyone.”

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Trump's sweeping proposal came in the aftermath of a deadly mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, by suspected Islamic State sympathisers and the day after President Obama asked the nation not to "turn against one another" out of fear.<sup>3</sup>

Addressing an election rally in Bluffton, South Carolina, on 16 February 2016, Trump said, "It wasn't the Iraqis that knocked down the World Trade Center. It wasn't the Iraqis. You will find out who really knocked down the World Trade Center, 'cuz they have papers in there that are very secret. You may find it's the Saudis, okay? But you will find out." The next morning on Fox and Friends program he said, "Who blew up the World Trade Center? It wasn't the Iraqis; it was Saudi—take a look at Saudi Arabia, open the documents." He was referencing the 28 pages that were redacted from the official 2002 Joint Inquiry into the 9/11 attacks. Those pages were widely believed to implicate Saudi elites in financing the attacks.<sup>4</sup>

After the US Senate passed, by voice vote, the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA), allowing families of 9/11 victims to sue the Saudi government, on 16 September 2016 following a voice vote by the House of Representatives a week earlier, Obama vetoed it on 23 September. He argued that JASTA could put the United States, its taxpayers, its service members, and its diplomats at "significant risk" if a similar law was adopted by other countries. Trump condemned Obama's veto, calling it "shameful... [it] will go down as one of the low points of his presidency," adding that as president he would sign the legislation.<sup>5</sup> But such a need did not arise. On 28 September the Senate overrode the veto by 97 votes to one, and the House by 348 to 77 votes. JASTA came into force two days later. As a result, 1,500 injured survivors and 850 family members of 9/11 victims would file a class action lawsuit against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on 20 March 2017, alleging that the Saudi government had prior knowledge that some of its officials and employees were Al Qaida operatives or sympathisers.

Trump nursed a grievance against the Desert Kingdom on another issue. As early as June 2015, he tweeted: "Saudi Arabia should be paying the United States many billions of dollars for our defense of them. Without us, gone!"<sup>6</sup> Nine months later he got a chance to deal with the subject at length during his interviews with Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger, which were published in the *New York Times* on

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26 March 2016. He argued that without US protection, Saudi Arabia would cease to exist, and that being “a monetary machine,” it should reimburse Washington for the amount the Pentagon spent to protect the kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

Saudi policy-makers had no intention of getting entangled in the internal affairs of America. Nonetheless, during his visit to Washington in July, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al Jubeir rejected Trump’s comments, telling CNN that the Saudi kingdom “carries its own weight” as an ally.<sup>8</sup> Bare facts spoke for themselves. A country of 30 million, Saudi Arabia had the third highest defense budget in the world, after America and China in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

But Trump persisted. Three months *after* assuming the presidency in January 2017, he complained that Saudi Arabia was not treating the United States fairly, and that Washington was losing a “tremendous amount of money” defending the kingdom.<sup>10</sup>

*New York Times* reporters sought Trump’s views on Iran’s nuclear agreement with six world powers. He said that deal was “not [for] long enough,” and asserted that he would never have given \$150 billion back to Tehran.<sup>11</sup>

A fact-checker at the *New York Times* or any other US media organization would have pointed out three salient facts to Trump: America was one of the six global powers negotiating with Iran; all six of them had to agree on each of the many points under discussion. The amount in the negotiations was \$100 billion, not \$150 billion; and, more importantly, since Iran’s \$100 billion overseas assets were held mainly in banks in China, India, Japan, South Korea and Turkey and frozen since 2012 under sanctions, the unfreezing of this amount had nothing to do with Washington.

### *The Jaw-dropping U-turns of Trump*

On 27 January the White House published President Trump’s executive order titled “Protection of The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States.” It put in place a ninety-day ban on entry to the US from citizens of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Libya and Somalia. The absence from the banned list of the Saudi Kingdom at which Trump had earlier pointed an accusing finger regarding 9/11 attacks surprised many.

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When, on ABC News, David Muir asked why Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia did not feature on the banned list, Trump replied: “We’re going to have extreme vetting in all cases. And I mean extreme.”<sup>12</sup> The implication was that Saudi Arabia was in the grey zone. The Executive Order blocked the travel plans of some 60,000 Muslim US visa holders and was immediately challenged in the American courts.

On 14 February a federal judge suspended the original order in Virginia because it was probably motivated by “religious prejudice” and not “rational national security concerns”, thus violating the First Amendment of the Constitution which guarantees freedom of worship. In support of the verdict, the judge cited Candidate Trump’s 7 December 2015 call for a blanket prohibition on the entry of all Muslims into the US, as well as comments by Trump’s advisers before and after the election, as evidence. “The ‘Muslim Ban’ was a centerpiece of the president’s campaign for months, and the press release calling for it was still available on his website as of the day this Memorandum opinion is being entered,” stated the ruling.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Trump issued a new Executive Order—a more detailed, narrowly focused order, applying to six Muslim majority countries, after the exclusion of Iraq. It was still open to judicial challenge.

Tellingly, while controversy about Trump’s Muslim travel ban raged in America, the Saudi government chose not to lobby for an emergency Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit. In its agenda the parochial interests of the Saudi Kingdom mattered far more than the rights of the broader Muslim population worldwide.

Saudi Arabia had noted with great approval Trump’s decision to reverse the foreign policy achievements of Obama who had fallen from favor with Riyadh particularly after Washington’s nuclear deal with Iran and the Obama administration’s scrutiny of Riyadh’s repeated targeting of civilian sites in Yemen. This was considered sufficient common ground for the scheduling of a meet-and-greet meeting between the Saudi Deputy, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, and Trump in Washington. The original arrangement was upgraded to a working lunch between the two at the recommendation of Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of and senior adviser to Trump. Kushner, an Orthodox Jew and a real-estate tycoon, had been assigned the task of conciliating Israelis and Palestinians. He envisaged Saudi Arabia aiding the process

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even though the Kingdom did not recognize Israel. Nevertheless the working lunch between Trump and Bin Salman and their close aides at the White House went well, with Trump reportedly promising to lift the suspension of some 16,000 guided munitions kits imposed by the previous administration to boost Washington's support to Riyadh in its military campaign in Yemen. It set the scene for Saudi Arabia to become Trump's first foreign destination as president. It was hard to reconcile this decision with the ruling of a judge in Virginia nearly a month earlier that Trump's 27 January travel ban was based on religious prejudice against Muslims.

As Trump's travel plans firmed up, King Salman and his favorite son prepared to welcome the American president in spectacular fashion. They went all out to massage the ego of the narcissist Trump with excessive flattery, to underscore their anti-extremist credentials in the eyes of the new administration in Washington and to build an anti-Iran front among Muslim nations.

As a preview of the lavish welcome that awaited the President and his entourage in Riyadh, the management of the Ritz Carlton Hotel projected a five-story-high image of Trump onto its façade, pairing it with a similarly huge and flattering photo of King Salman.<sup>14</sup> On arrival in Riyadh on 20 May, the American guests found the capital's streets lined for miles with alternating US and Saudi flags. In addition, the city was splashed with billboards carrying pictures of Trump and Salman over the slogan "Together we prevail." But against whom? That was left to the imagination of the spectator.

After Trump's one-on-one talk with Salman, the two leaders signed documents which included an arms deal which the White House described as worth \$350 billion over the next decade. A day earlier Pentagon officials had told The Associated Press that "the immediate sale" was worth \$110 billion and included "Abrams tanks, combat ships, missile defense systems, radar, and communications and cyber security technology."<sup>15</sup> But even the lower figure of \$110 billion turned out to be a highly exaggerated. Many of the items listed as part of the package had already been offered to Riyadh during the Obama administration, including a Patriot Missile Defense System, multi-mission Surface Combatants, attack helicopters, and artillery systems. Thus what was publicized as a new deal was in reality mostly a mix of offers

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already made by the US and promises yet to be fulfilled.<sup>16</sup> The end-purpose of mentioning high figures for US weaponry was to emphasise the Trump administration's uncritical support for Riyadh, its hostility to Tehran, and its focus on "jobs, jobs, jobs," as Trump kept trumpeting. Before tucking into his dinner, an awkward looking Trump brandished a sword in an all-male sword dance, a speciality of the Desert Kingdom.

The high point of Trump's visit was the speech he delivered to the Arab Islamic summit. The Saudi government invited the heads of 57 member-states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation except Iran, Syria and the Palestinian Authority. Of the fifty-four countries attending the summit in Riyadh on 21 May, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Iraq were Shia-majority states.<sup>17</sup>

"We must be united in pursuing the one [overarching] goal ... to conquer extremism and vanquish the forces of terrorism," Trump told his audience. "The true toll of ISIS, Al Qaida, Hizbollah, Hamas, and so many others, must be counted not only in the number of dead. It must also be counted in generations of vanished dreams... A better future is only possible if your nations drive out the terrorists and extremists." He then turned to the specific target he had in mind. "From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region. For decades, Iran has fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror. ... Among Iran's most tragic and destabilizing interventions have been in Syria." He concluded his denunciation of the Islamic Republic thus: "The Iranian regime's longest-suffering victims are its own people. Iran has a rich history and culture, but the people of Iran have endured hardship and despair under their leaders' reckless pursuit of conflict and terror."<sup>18</sup>

It so happened that the suffering and despairing citizens of Iran had exercised their right to choose their leader for the next four years on 19 May. Indeed, this was the twelfth time these oppressed Iranians had been given the chance to elect their executive president since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Now, they re-elected Hassan Rouhani as president by a margin of 57 to 39 per cent, defeating his conservative rival Ebrahim Raisi. Four rounds of televised debates by the contestants had preceded the polling.<sup>19</sup>

After the speeches came the inauguration of the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology. This was done, symbolically, with

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Salman, Trump, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el Sisi touching a futuristically glowing orb. After that Trump had a series of much-publicized bilateral meetings with Arab leaders, starting with Sisi. Speaking through a translator, Sisi said to Trump, "You are a unique personality that is capable of doing the impossible." Smiling broadly, Trump replied, "I agree!"<sup>20</sup> Arab leaders had registered the fact that Trump had an unquenchable appetite for self-glorification. They found it easy to flatter him since they were themselves often surrounded by sycophants.

### *Haughty Bin Salman Throws Down a Gauntlet to Iran*

King Salman and the Deputy Crown Prince were buoyed by the fact that Trump had appointed retired US Marine general James Mattis as his Secretary of Defense. Mattis was vehemently anti-Iran, describing the Islamic Republic as "the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East." In August, 2010 President Obama asked Mattis, the freshly appointed commander of the US Central Command, CENTCOM, his priorities. He replied "Iran, Iran, and Iran." His hatred stemmed from the fact that US Marines, posted in Iraq after 2003, had suffered many casualties caused by an Iran-made singularly lethal device, known as an explosively formed penetrator (EFP), which fired a molten copper bullet capable of piercing armor, used by local Shia forces. Little wonder that as defense secretary Mattis opted for more vigorous support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, including additional planning assistance and more intelligence sharing.

Trump's animus toward Iran sharpened once he had imbibed the view of his first National Security Adviser, Michael Flynn, another former general. He conflated Tehran-backed Shia radicalism with Sunni jihadism, ignoring theological conflict between Sunnis and Shias, because it fitted his bigoted anti-Iran stance. In his speech to the Arab Islamic summit Trump would lump Iran and Sunni jihadis together as part of the same evil of terrorism.<sup>21</sup>

These factors emboldened Bin Salman to take an aggressively anti-Iran stance publicly. This came on 1 May 2017 in his hour long interview on the Dubai-based, Saudi-owned Al Arabiya television channel, which was aired simultaneously on several Saudi-owned satellite networks. Given his repeated claims that the Houthis in Yemen were pup-

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pets of Iran, he was asked if he saw a possibility for direct talks with Tehran. In his reply, he referred to a Twelver Shia belief of waiting for the arrival of the 12th Hidden Imam, who disappeared around 873 CE, as al Mahdi, or the Messiah, to bring justice to the world: “How can I come to an understanding with someone, or a regime, that has an anchoring belief built on an extremist ideology?” he asked rhetorically. He went on to assert that “We are a primary target for the Iranian regime,” and accused it of seeking to take over Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia. “We won’t wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia. Instead, we’ll work so that the battle is for them in Iran.”<sup>22</sup>

Within weeks this would translate into the Saudi government brutally crushing the simmering Shia protest in Awamiyah, the birth place of Ayatollah Nimr al Nimr, who was executed in January 2016. In the same interview, putting a brave face on the grinding, expensive stalemate in the Yemen conflict, Bin Salman claimed that Saudi forces could uproot the rebels “in a few days,” but that doing so would kill thousands of Saudi troops and many civilians. So, he said, the coalition is waiting for the rebels to tire out. “Time is in our favor,” he concluded.<sup>23</sup>

Trump’s vehement attack on Iran at the Islamic Arab Summit triggered a chain of events which would over the next several months lead to results that countered the trumpeted aims of Bin Salman and the US president.

On 23 May Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani attended a military graduation ceremony in Doha. Later that day the state-run Qatar News Agency (QNA), reportedly carried remarks by the ruler on several sensitive regional issues and Qatar’s relationship with Trump. Emir Tamim was quoted as saying “there is no wisdom in harboring hostility towards Iran,” and that his relationship with the Trump administration was “tense” despite a cordial meeting he had with the US president in Riyadh two days earlier. Before the talk, Trump said “One of the things that we will discuss is the purchase of lots of beautiful military equipment because nobody makes it like the US,” adding that “And for us, that means jobs and it also means, frankly, great security back here, which we want.”<sup>24</sup> This was a reference to the sale of up to seventy-two Boeing F-15 fighter jets to Qatar for \$21.1 billion, approved by the Obama administration in November.<sup>25</sup> Now the same Emir Tamim was quoted as saying that he did not believe Trump would last long in office.

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He described Qatar's ties with Israel as "good", and hoped to help broker a peace deal in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The QNA story attributed to Emir Tamim positive statements about Hizbollah and Hamas as well as the Muslim Brotherhood. These remarks were picked up by several other news outlets and broadcasters in the Arab world, triggering hostile reactions in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Their governments blocked the main website of Qatar's Al Jazeera, which they had long considered as being critical of them.<sup>26</sup>

The contradiction between Qatar hosting Hizbollah and Hamas as well as the Muslim Brotherhood and simultaneously maintaining cordial relations with Israel was so egregious that the supposed QNA story should have been seen straightaway as fake. The Qatari authorities said so by claiming that the QNA website had been hacked. There was no question of Emir Tamim making all these alleged statements because he did not deliver a speech at the graduation ceremony. This was immaterial to the Saudi and Emirati media. They used the fake story to slam Qatar. The Jeddah-based *Okaz* daily screamed: "Qatar splits the rank, sides with the enemies of the nation." And Riyadh's *Arab News* reported that the comments sparked "outrage" among other Gulf States.<sup>27</sup>

Taking advantage of the media war, Bin Salman and UAE Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan co-opted Bahrain and Egypt to move against Qatar. On 5 June, they severed diplomatic ties with Qatar, closed all borders, sea lanes and air space to Qatar; prohibited their citizens from traveling to Qatar, and banned all Qatari residents from traveling to their countries. Saudis in particular claimed to be focused on Qatar's alleged role in financing terrorist groups in the region. The move stunned officials and residents of the tiny emirate.

By contrast, the impulsive Trump, uninformed on the subject, instantly accepted the Saudi move at face value. He even went on to take credit for it. "During my recent trip to the Middle East I stated that there can no longer be funding of Radical Ideology. Leaders pointed to Qatar—look!" ran his tweet.<sup>28</sup> Trump's hasty conclusion, based on flawed memory and bordering on incompetence, was exposed the same day by none other than the Pentagon. On 6 June its spokesman renewed praise of Qatar for hosting a vital US air base and for its "enduring commitment to regional security."<sup>29</sup>

In fact, military cooperation between Doha and Washington started in early 1992 in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. In 1996, Qatar built

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the Al Udeid Air Base 25 miles southwest of Doha, at a cost of over \$1 billion. Through a secret agreement, the Qatari Emir, Hamad Al Thani, let the Pentagon use this base in its air campaign against Al Qaida and the Taliban after the 9/11 attacks. This became known only in March 2002, when US Vice President Dick Cheney stopped there during a trip to the region with a group of reporters. In 2003 the Qatari-American military relationship was dramatically upgraded when the Bush administration started preparing for its invasion of Iraq. Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler at the time, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, refused to let the Pentagon use the state-of-the-art operations facility at Al Kharj Air Base it had prepared for air strikes against Iraq. The Qatari emir came to Washington's rescue. He allowed the Pentagon to transfer all its equipment from Al Kharj to Al Udeid Air Base.<sup>30</sup> It would become the forward headquarters of CENTCOM, the Pentagon's key facility in the region. In June 2017, Al Udeid held no less than 10,000 US troops, 100 warplanes and some 100 British Royal Air Force personnel. They carried out air strikes on ISIS targets in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.<sup>31</sup>

Resistant to admitting a mistake or a defeat, Trump continued blindly to follow the Saudi lead. On 10 June he accused Qatar of being a "funder of terror at a very high level," and demanded a cutoff of that cash flow in order for Qatar to rejoin the circle of responsible nations. In Doha, Dana Shell Smith, the US ambassador to Qatar, retweeted a statement from the US Treasury Department praising Qatar for cracking down on extremist financing. Now Qatar expressed its readiness to sign on to fresh proposals being drafted by the Treasury Department to strengthen controls against the financing of militant groups.<sup>32</sup>

The contradictory stances of the Trump administration remained on track. On 15 June US Defense Secretary Mattis signed a \$12bn deal to supply Qatar up to 36 Boeing F-15 combat aircraft with his Qatari counterpart Khalid al Attiyah. "This is of course proof that US institutions are with us but we have never doubted that," said a Qatari official in Doha. "Our militaries are like brothers."<sup>33</sup>

On 21 June, King Salman precipitated a diplomatic earthquake in the Gulf by elbowing out Muhammad bin Nayef as crown prince and replacing him with his favorite son, Muhammad. Determined to stay calm and reasonable, the thirty-seven-year-old Qatari Emir Tamim sent a cable of congratulations to the Saudi monarch "on the occasion of the

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selection of his royal highness Prince Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud as Crown Prince,” expressing hope for “brotherly relations between the two brotherly countries”—a message reported by state-run Qatar News Agency and posted on social media.<sup>34</sup> Emir Tamim had ascended the throne in June 2013 after the voluntary abdication of his father, Hamad, a unique event in the history of the Arabian Peninsula. But Bin Salman, the architect of the anti-Qatar drive, was on a pre-determined trajectory. Implementing a previously agreed plan, on 22 June the anti-Qatari axis issued a list of thirteen sweeping demands to be accepted by Qatar within ten days in return for abandoning the diplomatic and trade embargo.

### *Bin Salman Reveals His Anti-Iran Mindset*

Tellingly, the list was topped by the demand, “Curb diplomatic ties with Iran and close its diplomatic missions.” The attempt to drive a wedge between Qatar and Iran was doomed to fail on purely economic grounds. Qatar shares the North Dome–South Pars gas field with Iran. At 3,750 sq miles, it is the largest field of its kind in the world, with its South Pars section, measuring about a third of the total, lying in Iran’s territorial waters. The aggregate recoverable gas reserves of this field are the equivalent of 230 billion barrels of oil, second only to Saudi Arabia’s reserves of conventional oil. Income from gas and oil provide Qatar with more than three-fifths of its GDP and seven-eighths of its export income. With a population of just 2.4 million, of whom only 300,000 are citizens,<sup>35</sup> Qatar’s per capita GDP, at \$74,667, was the highest on the planet. As such, Doha could not afford to become an adversary of Iran.

The third demand read, “Shut down Al Jazeera and its affiliate stations.” Al Jazeera television has long unnerved Saudi Arabia and the other autocratic Arab monarchies. Broadcasting in Arabic and English, the channel is available in 100 countries, giving Qatar a profile and reach far beyond the Arab world. Al Jazeera was the brain-child of Qatari Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani who seized power in a bloodless coup in June 1995 while his father, Emir Khalifa bin Hamad, was in Switzerland. In a concerted move, Emir Hamad abolished the ministry of information, eased media censorship and allocated \$140 million over the next five years for an independent 24-hour satellite TV

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news channel. Al Jazeera (Arabic: The Peninsula), started broadcasting in Arabic in November 1996, with its English channel going on air ten years later. From the start, its reporting staff consisted almost wholly of BBC-trained journalists who had lost their jobs seven months earlier when the Rome-based Orbit television, owned by a Saudi prince, cancelled its contract to produce news in Arabic for the BBC. Al Jazeera smashed the Middle Eastern mould of television news tied to local information and intelligence agencies. Two weekly discussion programs *The Opposite Direction* and *The Other Opinion* debated controversial subjects including religion and politics, Arab relations with Israel, and the role of monarchs in the Arab world. During the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, Al Jazeera was the prime source of reliable news. The soaring popularity of Al Jazeera led several Arab governments to allow more leeway to state-controlled or -guided media in their countries. Nonetheless, Al Jazeera remained a thorn in the side of authoritarian regimes, particularly in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The list of Saudi-led demands challenged the sovereignty not just of Qatar, but also of Turkey. High on the list of demands was “Immediately terminate the Turkish military presence in Qatar and end any joint military cooperation with Turkey inside Qatar.” The Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Isik described the ultimatum as unacceptable interference in Ankara’s relations with Doha. Turkey was targeted by the anti-Qatar Axis because, ruled by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, leader of the Islamist Justice and Development Party since 2003, it had emerged as a strong supporter of the transnational Muslim Brotherhood. Its candidate, Muhammad Morsi, won the first free and fair presidential election in Egyptian history in June 2012. His overthrow by the generals a year later was applauded by Riyadh which announced a \$12 billion rescue package for the military regime. By contrast Tehran condemned the military coup against the popularly elected president.

In March 2014 Saudi Arabia declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization. Its hostility against it stems from the fact that the latter’s leaders demonstrated in Egypt that Sharia rule could be established in a Muslim country by the ballot box, and reiterated that ultimate power lies with the people, not a dynasty. It is worth noting that the Brotherhood was not on Washington’s list of terrorist organizations.<sup>36</sup>

While Turkey lined up with Qatar, most Muslim countries remained neutral. Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation, called for dia-

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logue between Riyadh and Doha to defuse the crisis. So did Pakistan despite the fact that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had maintained close relations with the Saudi royals for many years. Even within the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council, Kuwait and Oman stayed above the fray. Kuwait did so because 30 per cent of its 1.23 million citizens are Shia. It also has had an elected parliament since 1962 in which opinions are freely expressed. Oman could not afford to alienate Iran, given that its territorial waters overlap those of Iran in the strategic Straits of Hormuz.

Apart from America, no other Western nation backed the anti-Qatari move by Riyadh and its three Arab allies. Doha's twelve-year-old sovereign wealth fund, operating as the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), had assets worth \$335 billion. A third of these were invested in the emirate, with the bulk scattered across the globe.<sup>37</sup> It owns the Santa Monica-based Miramax, a film producing and distributing company. It was the fourth largest investor in US office space, mainly in New York and Los Angeles, and it owns almost 10 per cent of the Empire State Building's owner, Empire State Realty Trust Inc. QIA also owns London's tallest building, the Shard, the famed Harrods stores, and a quarter of the properties in the upscale Mayfair neighborhood. Its wholly-owned Paris Saint-Germain Football Club had won four French soccer league titles. It was the largest shareholder of Germany's Volkswagen AG. And in the biggest office transaction in Singapore, valued at \$2.5 billion, it acquired the highly prestigious Asia Square Tower.

Overall, the four members of the anti-Qatar Axis rushed into their drastic action against Doha without assessing objectively its geopolitical and economic strengths as well as its military ties with Washington; and soft power as exercised by Al Jazeera. To help it overcome the consequences of the Saudi-led boycott, within a week three Iranian ships, carrying 350 tonnes of fruit and vegetables, were set to sail from the port of Dayyer for Doha.<sup>38</sup> This was in addition to five Iranian cargo planes, loaded with 450 tonnes of perishable food, that had landed in Doha.

### *ISIS Targets Shias—in Iran and Saudi Arabia*

A few weeks after his address to the Islamic Arab summit, President Trump's thesis of conflating Iran-backed Shia radicalism with Sunni jihadism to form the same evil of terrorism fell apart.