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بوفيه غذاء مفتوح

SHISH KABOB

## Saudi Arabia to Monitor Interpretations of Prophet's Sayings

King Salman orders establishment of authority to scrutinise uses of the "hadith" - accounts of sayings, actions of Prophet Muhammad to prevent their use in justifying extremism.

Traditional Saudi Wahhabi doctrine favours a strict version of Islamic law.



RIYADH - Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is to monitor interpretations of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings to prevent them being used to justify violence or terrorism, the Culture and Information Ministry has said.

In a decree, King Salman ordered the establishment of an authority to scrutinise uses of the "hadith" - accounts of the sayings, actions or habits of the Prophet that are used by preachers and jurists to support teachings and edicts on all aspects of life.

The body will be based in Medina and overseen by a council of senior Islamic scholars from around the world, according to the decree. The ministry offered no specific details of how it would work in practice.

Islamist groups such as Islamic State and al Qaeda have used interpretations of hadiths numbered in the thousands and pored over by scholars for centuries to justify violence and to urge supporters to carry out attacks.

Saudi Arabia's approach to religious doctrine is important because of its symbolic position as the birthplace of Islam, while its oil exports allow it to fund mosques abroad.

Its ultra-conservative Wahhabi clergy have been close to the Al Saud dynasty since the mid-18th century, offering it Islamic legitimacy in return for control over mosques and universities.

The traditional Wahhabi doctrine favours a strict version of Islamic law and a return to early Muslim practices, and views Shi'ites as heretics.

But senior clergy have denounced militant Islamist doctrines such as those of al Qaeda or Islamic State, while the government, which vets clerics in Saudi Arabia's 70,000 mosques, has sacked many for encouraging violence or sedition.

Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said last month that thousands of extremist clerics had been dismissed,

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## Keeping Out of Syria



By Robert S. Ford

The Syrian civil war has entered a new phase. President Bashar al-Assad's government has consolidated its grip on the western half of the country, and in the east, U.S.-backed forces are advancing on the remnants of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). So far, these two campaigns have remained largely separate. But that is changing: Assad, with Iranian and Russian help, is starting to project more power into eastern Syria. As ISIS' remaining territory shrinks, Syrian and U.S.-backed forces are converging on the same cities. Before long, Washington will have to decide whether, when, and how to withdraw.

The United States has no good options in Syria, but some are worse than others. By now, hopes of getting rid of Assad or securing a reformed government are far-fetched fantasies, and so support for antigovernment factions should be off the table. The Syrian government is determined to take back the entire country and will probably succeed in doing so. That means the United States will have to abandon any hopes of supporting a separate Kurdish region or securing respect for human rights and democracy. And because Assad's government is deeply corrupt, the United States should also rule out providing the regime with aid for reconstruction. There is, however, one way in which the United States can still do good: easing the suffering of the millions of Syrian refugees outside the country. By focusing on their plight, Washington would help some of the most vulnerable Syrians, reduce the burden on the countries that host them, and curb opportunities for jihadist recruitment in refugee communities.

**VICTORY IN THE WEST**  
Over the last year and a half, Assad's government has achieved an unprecedented

string of military successes in western Syria. In December 2016, it forced the last rebel fighters and their families to quit Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, and then in May, it seized the final rebel holdout in the country's third-largest city, Homs. Meanwhile, government forces have advanced steadily against longtime rebel strongholds near Damascus, capturing Daraya in August 2016 and Barzeh and Qaboun this past spring.

Assad has also benefited from foreign help. The Iranian government has assembled tens of thousands of Shiite fighters from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and even Pakistan to fight for the Syrian government. Together with Russian air support, these troops helped Assad's ground forces recapture Syria's main population centers.

At the same time as Assad has received help from abroad, the opposition's foreign support has withered away. In 2016, Turkey and the United States fell out over U.S. backing for Syrian Kurds fighting ISIS in eastern Syria. Turkey, fearing the development of an independent Kurdish region along its southern border, dropped its campaign against Assad and redirected its aid to Syrian rebels who would fight the Kurds. Then, in July, U.S. President Donald Trump ended a largely moribund CIA program that had been intended to help secular rebels fighting Assad, as the groups it had supported had turned into mere auxiliaries of al-Nusra Front.

### CEASE-FIRES AREN'T THE ANSWER

As the military outcome has grown more certain, Russia has sought to capitalize on its intervention to secure a favorable political settlement that would halt the fighting and leave Syria under the control of the existing government. After the fall of Aleppo, Moscow brought delegations from the Syrian

Astana, Kazakhstan, along with officials from Iran and Turkey in the hope that each country would compel its Syrian allies to end hostilities on the ground. In May, Iran, Russia, and Turkey announced four "de-escalation zones" covering some of the remaining rebel strongholds in western Syria: Idlib in the northwest; an area including towns north of Homs; the eastern suburbs of Damascus; and the southwest corner of Syria near the Jordanian border, including the city of Daraa, where the uprising started in 2011. Under the agreement, all combatants would halt attacks against the nonextremist forces in those zones, and the Syrian government would allow access for humanitarian aid and returning civilians.

So far, these diplomatic efforts have met with incomplete success, largely because the Syrian government, with Iranian backing, has failed to observe the cease-fires whenever doing so would be to its advantage. Of the four de-escalation zones declared in May, only Idlib experienced a substantial decline in fighting at first. Government air strikes and ground assaults continued north of Homs, in eastern Damascus, and in the southwest. Then, in July, Russia—working with Jordan and the United States, which had backed the southern rebels introduced a new cease-fire deal in the southwest, which has held up better. Syrian government forces will keep advancing, mile by mile, by turns obeying and flouting cease-fires as military advantage dictates.

The ability to selectively respect de-escalation zones has proved a military gift to the Syrian government. In the southwest, the Syrian army was making only slow headway in Daraa. And without sustained Russian air support to complement Syrian ground and air assaults, retaking Idlib would have been difficult, if not impossible. As a result, by August, the Syrian government was largely respecting the cease-fires around Daraa and Idlib while shifting its troops away from the southwestern border to attack the eastern sub-

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## Hamas and Fatah's Step Forward Takes Palestine a Step Back

### Why Reconciliation Hurts the Palestinian People

By Dana El Kurd

Last month, the government of Hamas in Gaza and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in the West Bank began reconciliation talks in Cairo, following a week of symbolic cabinet meetings and visits by high-ranking Egyptian officials to the Gaza Strip. The proceedings have remained closely guarded, but within a few days, Hamas and Fatah officials announced that a deal had been reached over how to jointly govern Gaza, which involves Fatah controlling the border crossing with Egypt and the deployment of 3,000 Palestinian Authority security forces in the Gaza Strip. The talks have come after a decade-long rift between the two political groups. In 2007, fighting broke out after Hamas won a majority in the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections and Fatah and its allies refused to accept the results. Since then, the conditions in Gaza have worsened due to an Israeli-imposed blockade. Levels of poverty and unemployment have increased dramatically. Gazans have been cut off for an entire decade from essential building materials and food-stuffs, as well as from access to their own resources, such as offshore gas reserves. These conditions have been coupled with repeated assaults by Israel, which have overall made life untenable for ordinary Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Post-Arab Spring politics in the Middle East have also complicated life in Gaza. In 2013, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who became president of Egypt after leading a coup against the Muslim Brotherhood-backed president Mohamed Morsi, reinforced the blockade on Gaza from the Egyptian border to punish Hamas for its relationship with Morsi. Similarly, because Hamas did not take the Syrian regime's side during Syria's uprising and ensuing civil war, President Bashar al-Assad and his sponsor Iran severed ties with the group. And this

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**Iraq's Shiite Militias Are Just Getting Started**  
**The Iranian-Backed Forces that Took Control of Kirkuk from the Kurds are Setting their Sights on Baghdad.**

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