

Saudi Foreign Minister: ‘I Don’t Think World War III Is Going To Happen in Syria’

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Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir at the Westin Grand Hotel during the Munich Security Conference: “ISIS is as much an Islamic organization as the KKK in America is a Christian organization.”

Interview Conducted By [Samiha Shafy](#) and [Bernhard Zand](#)

*In an interview, **Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir** expresses his continued support for regime change in Syria and his desire for rebels to be supplied with anti-aircraft missiles that could shift the balance of power in the war.*

The wait for the interview with the minister takes six hours, but then he greets the journalists in a large conference room in a grand hotel in Munich. Adel al-Jubeir, 54, a slim, amiable man, wears a traditional robe and looks a bit fatigued. He and his counterparts spent the previous evening negotiating a cease-fire in Syria well into the night. And since early this morning, they have been busily discussing current global events. Al-Jubeir is the embodiment of a new breed of top Saudi Arabian leaders: He went to school in Germany and college in the United States and then served as the Saudi ambassador to Washington. In contrast to his longtime predecessor

Prince Saud al-Faisal, who served as the country’s top diplomat for decades stretching from the oil crisis in the 1970s until early 2015, al-Jubeir is not a member of the royal family. At the time of his appointment as foreign minister last April, Saudi Arabia had just [gone to war](#) with neighboring Yemen and the situation in Syria was escalating.

Al-Jubeir is now responsible for representing his country’s controversial foreign policy. And he allowed himself plenty of time to do so in this interview with SPIEGEL. When his staff sought to end the interview after 45 minutes because he had a speech to give at the Munich Security Conference, al-Jubeir suggested we continue the discussion in his limousine — both on the way to his talk and back to the hotel afterward.

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SPIEGEL: Mr. al-Jubeir, have you ever seen the Middle East in worse shape than it is in today?

Al-Jubeir: The Middle East has gone through periods of turmoil before. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were revolutions. When monarchies were collapsing in a number of countries, we had radicals and we had Nasserism. Today it’s a little bit more complicated.

SPIEGEL: The most complicated and dangerous situation, obviously, is the one in Syria. What does Saudi Arabia want to achieve in this conflict?

Al-Jubeir: I don't think anyone can predict what the short term will look like. In the long term, it will be a Syria without Bashar Assad. The longer it takes, the worse it will get. We warned when the crisis began in 2011 that unless it was resolved quickly, the country would be destroyed. Unfortunately, our warnings are coming true.

SPIEGEL: What do you want to do now that the Assad regime has gained the upper hand?

Al-Jubeir: We have always said there are two ways to resolve Syria, and both will end up with the same result: a Syria without Bashar Assad. There is a political process which we are trying to achieve through what is called the Vienna Group. That involves the establishment of a governing council, which is to take power away from Bashar Assad, to write a constitution and to open the way for elections. It is important that Bashar leaves in the beginning, not at the end of the process. This will make the transition happen with less death and destruction.

SPIEGEL: And the other option?

Al-Jubeir: The other option is that the war will continue and Bashar Assad will be defeated. If, as we decided in Munich, there will be a cessation of hostilities and humanitarian assistance can flow into Syria — then this will open the door for the beginning of the political transition process. We are at a very delicate juncture, and it may not work, but we have to try it. Should the political process not work, there is always the other approach.

SPIEGEL: Assad has said he considers a short-term cease-fire in Syria to be impossible. Has the Munich agreement failed already?

Al-Jubeir: Bashar Assad has said many things. We will see in the near term whether he is serious about a political process.

SPIEGEL: Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev spoke of the danger of "World War III" at the Munich Security Conference.

Al-Jubeir: I think this is an over-dramatization. Let's not forget: This all began when you had eight- and nine-year-old children writing graffiti on walls. Their parents were told: "You will never see them again. If you want to have children, go to your wife and make new ones." Assad's people rebelled. He crushed them brutally. But his military could not protect him. So he asked the Iranians to come in and help. Iran sent its Revolutionary Guards into Syria, they brought in Shia militias, Hezbollah from Lebanon, militias from Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, all Shia, and they couldn't help. Then he brought in Russia, and Russia will not save him. At the same time, we have a war against Daesh (the Islamic State, or IS) in Syria. A coalition that was led by the United States, with Saudi Arabia being one of the first members of that coalition.

SPIEGEL: You've just named all the actors. Is that not already a world war of sorts?

Al-Jubeir: I will get to this in a second, if you allow me. The air campaign started, but it became very obvious that there may have to be a ground component. Saudi Arabia has said that if the US-led coalition against Daesh is prepared to engage in ground operations, we will be prepared to participate with special forces. The Russians say their objective is to

defeat Daesh, too. If the deployment of ground troops helps in the fight against Daesh, why is that World War III? Is Russia worried that defeating Daesh will open the door for defeating Bashar Assad? That would be a different story. But I don't think World War III is going to happen in Syria.

SPIEGEL: Would Saudi Arabian ground troops only battle Islamic State or would you also join the fight against Assad?

Al-Jubeir: We expressed our readiness to join the US-led, international coalition against Daesh with special forces. All of this, however, is still in the discussion phase and in the initial planning phase.

SPIEGEL: Is Saudi Arabia in favor of supplying anti-aircraft missiles to the rebels?

Al-Jubeir: Yes. We believe that introducing surface-to-air missiles in Syria is going to change the balance of power on the ground. It will allow the moderate opposition to be able to neutralize the helicopters and aircraft that are dropping chemicals and have been carpet-bombing them, just like surface-to-air missiles in Afghanistan were able to change the balance of power there. This has to be studied very carefully, however, because you don't want such weapons to fall into the wrong hands.

SPIEGEL: Into the hands of Islamic State.

Al-Jubeir: This is a decision that the international coalition will have to make. This is not Saudi Arabia's decision.

SPIEGEL: The [Russian intervention](#) has had a big impact on the situation in Syria. How would you describe Saudi Arabia's relationship with Russia at this point?

Al-Jubeir: Other than our disagreement over Syria, I would say our relationship with Russia is very good and we are seeking to broaden and deepen it. Twenty million Russians are Muslims. Like Russia, we have an interest in fighting radicalism and extremism. We both have an interest in stable energy markets. Even the disagreement over Syria is more of a tactical one than a strategic one. We both want a unified Syria that is stable in which all Syrians enjoy equal rights.

SPIEGEL: That sounds well and good, but you are also providing support to the opposing camp in a war. Even more than your relationship with Russia, the world is worried about the deep schism between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Al-Jubeir : Iran has been a neighbor for millenia, and will continue to be a neighbor for millenia. We have no issue with seeking to develop the best terms we can with Iran. But after the revolution of 1979, Iran embarked on a policy of sectarianism. Iran began a policy of expanding its revolution, of interfering with the affairs of its neighbors, a policy of assassinating diplomats and of attacking embassies. Iran is responsible for a number of terrorist attacks in the Kingdom, it is responsible for smuggling explosives and drugs into Saudi Arabia. And Iran is responsible for setting up sectarian militias in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen, whose objective is to destabilize those countries.

SPIEGEL: If all this is the case, then how can you possibly establish "the best terms you can" with Iran?

Al-Jubeir: Yes, we want to have good ties with the Iranians, but if they want good ties with us, then I tell them: Don't keep attacking us as you have done for the last 35 years. As long as Iran's aggressive policies continue, it's going to be bad for the region. Iran has to decide whether it wants a revolution or a nation-state.

SPIEGEL: Are the Iranians the only ones to blame? What can Saudi Arabia offer to improve this vital relationship?

Al-Jubeir: Show me one Iranian diplomat we killed! I can show you many Saudi diplomats who were killed by Iran. Show me one Iranian embassy that was attacked by Saudi Arabia. Show me one terrorist cell that we planted in Iran. Show me one activity by Saudi Arabia to create problems among Iranian minorities.

SPIEGEL: Your Iranian counterpart, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, accused Saudi Arabia of provoking Iran by actively sponsoring violent extremist groups.

Al-Jubeir: What's the provocation that he's talking about?

SPIEGEL: Is Saudi Arabia not financing extremist groups? Zarif speaks of attacks by al-Qaida, the Syrian al-Nusra and other groups — of attacks on Shiite mosques from Iraq to Yemen.

Al-Jubeir: Yes, but that's not us. We don't tolerate terrorism. We go after the terrorists and those who support them and those who justify their actions. Our record has been very clear, contrary to their record. They harbor al-Qaida leaders. They facilitate al-Qaida operations. They complain about Daesh, but Iran is the only country around the negotiating table that has not been attacked by either al-Qaida or Daesh.

SPIEGEL: Can the West play a role in mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran, following the example of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the organization which helped end the Cold War?

Al-Jubeir: The Iranians know what they need to do in order to become a responsible member of the international community and in order to become a good neighbor, and it's really up to them to change their behavior.

SPIEGEL: So there is nothing that Saudi Arabia itself or the West could do to encourage this process?

Al-Jubeir: There is nothing to encourage. The Iranians should just stay away from us.

SPIEGEL: How do you explain the ideological closeness between the Wahhabi faith in Saudi Arabia and Islamic State's ideology? How do you explain that Daesh applies, with slight differences, the same draconian punishments that the Saudi judiciary does?

Al-Jubeir: This is an oversimplification which doesn't make sense. Daesh is attacking us. Their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, wants to destroy the Saudi state. These people are criminals. They're psychopaths. Daesh members wear shoes. Does this mean everybody who wears shoes is Daesh?

SPIEGEL: Are you contesting the similarities between the extremely conservative interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia and Islamic State's religious ideology?

Al-Jubeir: ISIS is as much an Islamic organization as the KKK in America is a Christian organization. They burned people of African descent on the cross, and they said they're doing it in the name of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, in every religion there are people who pervert the faith. We should not take the actions of psychopaths and paint them as being representative of the whole religion.

SPIEGEL: Doesn't Saudi Arabia have to do a lot more to distance itself from ISIS and its ideology?

Al-Jubeir: It seems people don't read or listen. Our scholars and our media have been very outspoken. We were the first country in the world to hold a national public awareness campaign against extremism and terrorism. Why would we not want to fight an ideology whose objective is to kill us?

SPIEGEL: At the same time, your judges mete out sentences that shock the world. The blogger Raif Badawi has been sentenced to prison and 1,000 lashes. On Jan. 2, 47 men were beheaded, among them Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. His nephew Ali has been sentenced to death as well and his body is to be crucified after the execution.

Al-Jubeir: We have a legal system, and we have a penal code. We have the death penalty in Saudi Arabia, and people should respect this. You don't have the death penalty, and we respect that.

SPIEGEL: Should we respect the flogging of people?

Al-Jubeir: Just like we respect your legal system, you should respect our legal system. You cannot impose your values on us, otherwise the world will become the law of the jungle. Every society decides what its laws are, and it's the people who make decisions with regards to these laws. You cannot lecture another people about what you think is right or wrong based on your value system unless you're willing to accept others imposing their value system on you.

SPIEGEL: Is it even compatible with human rights to display the body of an executed person?

Al-Jubeir: This is a judgment call. We have a legal system, and this is not something that happens all the time. We have capital punishment. America has capital punishment. Iran has capital punishment. Iran hangs people and leaves their bodies hanging on cranes. Iran put to death more than a thousand people last year. I don't see you reporting on it.

SPIEGEL: We have reported on it.

Al-Jubeir: Anyway, Nimr al-Nimr ...

SPIEGEL: ... who was executed on Jan. 2 and was the uncle of Ali al-Nimr ...

Al-Jubeir: Nimr was a terrorist, he recruited, he plotted, he financed and as a consequence of his actions a number of Saudi Arabian police were killed. Are we supposed to put him on a pedestal? He was put on trial. His trial was reviewed at the appellate level. It went to the supreme court, and the sentence was death, like the other 46 people who were put to death.

SPIEGEL: Your foreign policy has become more aggressive as well. According to the United Nations, about 6,000 people have been killed in Yemen since the beginning of the Saudi Arabian offensive in March 2015. What do you want to achieve with this war?

Al-Jubeir: The war in Yemen is not a war that we wanted. We had no other option — there was a radical militia allied with Iran and Hezbollah that took over the country. It was in possession of heavy weapons, ballistic missiles and even an air force. Should we stand by idly while this happens at our doorstep, in one of the countries in which al-Qaida has a huge presence? So we responded, as part of a coalition, at the request of the legitimate government of Yemen, and we stepped in to support them. We have removed, to a large extent, the threat that these weapons posed to Saudi Arabia. Now 75 percent of Yemen has been liberated and is under the control of the government forces.



Yemeni men inspect the damage at the site of a Saudi-led coalition air strike which hit a sewing workshop in the capital Sanaa, on Feb. 14, 2016. [AFP]

SPIEGEL: For how long is this supposed to continue? Half of the victims in this war have been civilians.

Al-Jubeir: We will continue the operation until the objective is achieved. We hope that the Houthis and Saleh will agree to a political settlement, and we are prepared, along with our Gulf allies, to put in place a very substantial reconstruction plan for Yemen. We have no interest in seeing an unstable Yemen or seeing a Yemen that is devastated.

SPIEGEL: With several interventions in Yemen, Syria and other countries in the region, it appears that Saudi Arabia is aspiring to become the Middle East's hegemonial power. Isn't your country punching above its weight?

Al-Jubeir: We are not seeking this role for Saudi Arabia. What we want is stability and security so we can focus on our own development. But we have these problems in our region, and nobody has been able to resolve them. The whole world was saying that the countries of the regions should step up and resolve their problems, so we stepped up. Now people are saying, "Oh my God, Saudi Arabia has changed." It's a contradiction. Do you want us to lead, or do you want us to play a supporting role? Because we can't do both. If you want us to lead, don't criticize us. And if you want us to play a supporting role, then tell us who is going to lead.

SPIEGEL: Does Saudi Arabia feel threatened by the Iranian nuclear deal, by a possible rapprochement between your hostile neighbor and your closest ally in the West, the United States?

Al-Jubeir: We support any deal that denies Iran nuclear weapons, that has a continuous and robust inspection mechanism and that has snap-back provisions in case Iran violates the agreement. Our concern is that Iran will use the income it receives as a result of the lifting of the nuclear sanctions in order to fund its nefarious activities in the region.

SPIEGEL: The United States' foreign policy in the Middle East has become more restrained under President Obama. Is that a mistake?

Al-Jubeir: I don't believe in the theory that the United States is reducing its presence in the Middle East. Quite the contrary, in the Gulf, we see an increase in American military presence, as well as an increase in American investments. The argument is more accurate when one says America is focusing more attention to the Far East. But I don't believe it comes at the expense of the Middle East.

SPIEGEL: Your Excellency, we thank you for this interview.

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