

# Saudi Arabia Tells Syria: "Stop the Killing Machine"

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 Brief Analysis

## The United States should support Saudi King Abdullah's condemnation of President Bashar al-Asad's tactics against demonstrators even though it is an implicit call for a military coup.

Today, after more news of Syrian tanks being used against civilian protestors, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia issued a forthright statement via the official Saudi Press Agency: "What is happening in Syria is unacceptable to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." Without referring to President Bashar al-Asad by name, he criticized the Syrian leader by calling for "activation of wisdom" and "the use of reason before it is too late." He also said, "The future of Syria is between only two options: either it chooses wisdom willingly, or drifts into the depths of chaos and loss." He ended his statement by announcing the recall of the Saudi ambassador to Damascus.

The Saudi king's intervention has elevated the Syrian crisis to a new diplomatic level. Within hours, Kuwait and Bahrain had also withdrawn their envoys, joining another Gulf Arab state, Qatar, which had done so earlier. In Syria, Asad sacked his minister of defense, leading to speculation that he was trying shore up his regime against a coup by the armed forces. In the eastern city of Deir al-Zour, Syrian military units were reportedly in action against civilians opposing the regime.

The United States should take advantage of the diplomatic opportunity created by Saudi Arabia. In the past, Damascus has responded to regional and wider diplomatic pressure. Washington should step up its efforts with European and other states to pressure for either reform or change in Syria.

Such a policy is not without risks. A possible military regime in Damascus would not be a panacea. Also, Riyadh might be unwilling to go further than its statement -- King Abdullah is eighty-eight years old, and his capacity for diplomatic effort is limited. But his strong words are typical of his reputation for directness and Saudi Arabia's claimed leadership of the Arab and Muslim worlds, particularly during the current fasting month of Ramadan.

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