

# SAUDI OUTREACH TO HAMAS PART OF WIDER EFFORT AGAINST IRAN

**RIYADH:** Saudi King Salman's meeting on Friday with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal was part of an effort by Riyadh to shore up Arab unity in the face of a perceived threat from Iran that it believes has become more urgent since last week's nuclear deal. Saudi Arabia, a conservative Sunni Muslim monarchy, has grown more aggressive this year in countering Shiite, revolutionary Iran across the region, believing its influence to be the main cause of instability and insecurity in Arab states.

Riyadh fears the agreement Tehran struck with six world powers to release it from sanctions in return for more intrusive inspections of its atomic facilities will free Iran to increase its support for Saudi Arabia's enemies in Arab countries. "It's part of the grand strategy of countering Iranian influence. It's the main issue for Saudi Arabia and it's more urgent after the nuclear deal," said Mustafa Alani, an Iraqi analyst close to the Saudi Interior Ministry.

Since Salman became king in January, he has tried to build a Sunni coalition against Iran's regional allies, boosting

support for rebels against Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad and waging war against Yemen's Houthis militia. The Saudis have for years regarded Hamas with intense suspicion because the Palestinian militant group is both a traditional ally of Iran and also an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement Riyadh has often seen as a threat.

Although the Brotherhood, like Saudi Arabia, is Sunni, Riyadh distrusts it because it combines a call to conservative religious values that might appeal to the kingdom's citizens with demands to replace dynastic rule with elections. Salman's predecessor Abdullah put the Brotherhood on a list of terrorist organisations and backed Egypt's crackdown on the group, a policy that caused tension with Turkey and Qatar, its two main allies in fighting Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq. Salman, while stopping short of befriending the Brotherhood, has worked to reduce tensions with the movement's own allies, strengthening Riyadh's ties with Ankara and Doha and reaching out to Islah, the Islamist group's offshoot in Yemen.

## Confrontational Mood

"Saudi Arabia is in a confrontational mood against Iran and its in the business of gathering as many allies as possible. So if they reach out to Malaysia or reach out to Hamas, it's the same. It's to create as many allies as possible," said Jamal Khashoggi, head of al-Arab news channel, owned by a Saudi prince. By building ties with Hamas, Riyadh might reduce tensions with Brotherhood allies and make it harder for Iran to present itself as the region's main defender of Palestinian resistance, and Saudi Arabia as covertly supporting Israel.

It also improves the chances Riyadh can help mediate a rapprochement between Hamas and the main Palestinian party, Fatah, potentially ending a split that has obstructed a push for statehood and led to recriminations around the region. During last year's Gaza war between Israel and Hamas, Saudi Arabia waited three weeks before condemning the Jewish state's offensive and some newspapers close to the ruling family blamed the Palestinian group for provoking the fighting.

Anger over the plight of Palestinians and the failure of Arab governments to create a state has for decades driven much opposition to the region's rulers, particularly among Islamists who frame the Palestinian cause in terms of Muslim solidarity.

Meanwhile, by putting longstanding differences over political Islam on the backburner, Salman is strengthening ties with both Turkey, whose ruling AK Party is linked to the Brotherhood, and Qatar, which has given the group sanctuary. Improved cooperation between the trio, the three countries most involved in supporting Syrian rebel groups, was credited earlier this year for opposition victories in Aleppo and the outskirts of Damascus.

## Insidious Threat

Profound splits between the Middle East's Sunni states over political Islam linger, however, with both Egypt and the UAE, core members of Saudi Arabia's coalition against the Houthis in Yemen, resolutely opposed to the Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia's ruling princes themselves continue to look on the movement

unfavourably. They recall how Riyadh offered sanctuary to its members during a 1960s purge in Egypt, and how they later backed a 1990s Islamist opposition movement against the ruling Al Saud.

Prince Nayef, the late veteran interior minister, elder full brother of King Salman and father of the current crown prince, once described the movement as "the source of all our problems in the Arab world". While many of his living relatives still see the group's secretive political activities and religious credentials as an insidious threat to their rule, it is Iran that they see posing the more immediate danger.

Riyadh hopes its new formula of tolerating the movement's activities outside Gulf countries, coupled with its support for Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, will keep both countries engaged in its wider struggle against Iran.

"The understanding with the Muslim Brotherhood now is that it will not be active inside Saudi Arabia or interfere in Gulf states. It's important that they understand these new rules of the game," said Alani. — Agencies

# MENTAL, DRUG ISSUES DOGGED US GUNMAN

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with his parents to help him get away from drugs, alcohol and a group of friends who relatives considered a bad influence, the representative said.

Counterterrorism investigators continue to interview Abdulazeez's acquaintances and delve into his visit to Jordan, looking for clues to whom or what might have influenced him and set off the bloodshed.

FBI spokesman Jason Pack declined comment on whether investigators were pursuing mental health records for Abdulazeez. But FBI Special Agent Ed Reinhold told reporters at the most recent news conference about the case that agents were looking into all aspects of his life and had not yet turned up any connections to Islamist terrorist groups.

Abdulazeez opened fire at a military recruiting office and a Navy-Marine operations center a few miles apart on Thursday, killing four Marines. A sailor wounded in the attack died Saturday. While Abdulazeez sometimes expressed misgivings about US policy in the Mideast, his feelings didn't seem extreme and there was no indication he was involved with terrorist groups while in Jordan, the family representative said. There was also no easy explanation for why he targeted military sites in the

attack. The representative said Abdulazeez had owned guns for years, going back to when he was a child shooting at squirrels and targets, and called himself an "Arab redneck" or "Muslim redneck". A year after graduating from college with an engineering degree, Abdulazeez lost a job at a nuclear power plant in Ohio in May 2013 because of what a federal official described as a failed drug test. Recently, Abdulazeez had begun working the night shift at a manufacturing plant and was taking medication to help with problems sleeping in the daytime, the representative said, and he also had a prescription for muscle relaxants because of a back problem.

It's unknown what substances were in the man's system at the time of the killings, but toxicology tests should provide an answer. After returning from his time overseas, Abdulazeez was arrested on a charge of driving under the influence in the pre-dawn hours on April 20. A police report said he told a Chattanooga officer he also was with friends who had been smoking marijuana. The report said Abdulazeez, who had white powder on his nose when he was stopped, told the officer he also had sniffed powdered caffeine.

The arrest was "important" because Abdulazeez was deeply embarrassed and seemed to sink further into depres-

sion following the episode, the representative said. Some close relatives learned of the charge only days before the shooting, the person said. Bassam Issa, president of the Islamic Society of Greater Chattanooga, said he knew nothing of Abdulazeez's problems, despite knowing his father well through the mosque. But, he added, that is not surprising. Drinking alcohol and using drugs is strictly forbidden in the Islamic faith. "In our culture, if a son or daughter is having those sorts of problems, they keep it a secret because of the shame," Issa said. "As a parent, you always want to be able to say your child is making you proud, not that they are struggling."

A former college professor who saw Abdulazeez at their mosque six days before the killings said the young man didn't seem different after returning from Jordan last year or during their final encounter.

"I just saw the same friendly guy as before," said Abdul Ofoli, who teaches electrical engineering at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, where Abdulazeez graduated in 2012. Ofoli, who sponsors the university's Muslim Student Association, said Abdulazeez wasn't very involved with the group to his knowledge and rarely said much in class but was a good student. "He was brilliant," said Ofoli. — AP

# AUSSIE SURF PRO FIGHTS OFF SHARK

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Fanning will split the prize money with Wilson. The two will share second place. "Mick's composure and quick acting in the face of a terrifying situation was nothing short of heroic and the rapid response of our Water Safety personnel was commendable," it said in a statement. Eleven-time world champion Kelly Slater was on the beach when the attack happened. "I'm lost for words to be honest. We almost just watched our friend get eaten by a shark and I'm just blown away that there's no damage

at all," he said. While attacks occur periodically across the world, Australian seven-time world champion Layne Beachley said she had never even seen a shark during her decades in the water, highlighting the rarity of such events. "I've been surfing for more than 40 years, I have never seen a shark or been intimidated by a shark - intimidated by dolphins and whales, but not sharks," she said in Sydney. "When we go into this environment we understand that this could potentially happen. But we have never seen this (in a pro event), this is unprecedented."

Craig Lambin, spokesman for the National Sea Rescue Institute in South Africa, told ENCA television news that he believed "it is probably the first time that an incident like this at a surfing competition has been caught on camera". Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, himself a keen surfer, said seeing a shark so close to a surfing contest was terrifying.

"I think all of us, we go out into the waves and we love to see dolphin fins, but if there's any doubt about what kind of a fin it is, it's pretty scary," he said. — Agencies

# UN ENDORSES IRAN NUKE DEAL

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exponentially," said US envoy Samantha Power. "It should motivate us to do far more." "We turn not simply a page but a whole chapter in the work of the Council by creating a new reality," said Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin. The nuclear deal has been touted as an opening for greater contact between Iran and the leading nations over common interests, particularly on tackling the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria. Iranian ambassador Golamali Khoshroo told the Security Council that Tehran was ready "to engage in good faith" with its neighbors in the region. "This is the time to start working together against our most common and important challenges, which include above all violent extremism," he said.

But the deal has been rejected by Israel and some Arab countries in the Middle East have raised concern that the deal will strengthen Iranian influence in the region. "Today you have awarded a

great prize to the most dangerous country in the world," Israeli ambassador to the United Nations Ron Prosor said after the vote. The resolution charges the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, to "undertake the necessary verification and monitoring of Iran's nuclear commitments". Those commitments include limiting the number of centrifuges for its fissile material. The resolution demands that Iran "cooperate fully" with the IAEA.

As soon as the council receives IAEA confirmation that the nuclear program is entirely peaceful, the seven UN sanctions resolutions against Tehran will be terminated and replaced by the terms of Monday's resolution. Sanctions to be lifted include a ban on the trade of goods or services linked to Iranian nuclear activities, and the freezing of financial assets of designated Iranian officials and companies. But embargoes on the sales and exports of conventional weapons and ballistic missile technology will remain in place - for five years for con-

ventional weapons and for eight years for missile technology. If Tehran violates any of its commitments, the council can initiate proceedings to reinstate its panoply of sanctions. The so-called "snapback" mechanism can put old sanctions back in place if world powers feel Iran has not met its commitments under the Vienna deal.

If a protest is made via a joint commission, the UN Security Council would have to vote on whether to continue the sanctions lifting. It leaves Iran under the threat of renewed sanctions for 15 years - 10 under the Vienna agreement endorsed by the UN, and the P5+1 committing to another five years of tight monitoring.

In the United States, a Republican-majority Congress has 60 days to review the deal.

The Congress can pass a motion of disapproval, but President Barack Obama can then veto that. An override of the veto requires two-thirds approval in both the House and Senate. — AFP

# SUICIDE BOMBER KILLS 30 IN TURKEY ATTACK

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The blast took place as an anti-IS group based at the cultural centre was preparing to announce a mission to Kobane.

Alp Altinors from the pro-Kurdish HDP party said the group from the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations was made up of about 300 people, mainly university students from across Turkey. "They were planning to build parks in Kobane, hand out toys for children and paint school walls," he told AFP. "The town is in chaos. Almost all the shops are closed in Suruc," local resident Mehmet Celik told AFP.

Russian President Vladimir Putin condemned the "barbaric act" and said in a statement: "Fighting terrorism requires an active cooperation from the whole international community." EU enlargement commissioner Johannes Hahn said in a Twitter message: "Tragic consequences of Syrian conflict felt in a neighboring country." Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu is sending three ministers to the southeastern region following the bombing, his office announced. "We are calling on everyone to show common sense in the face of this terrorist attack targeting our country's unity," the interior ministry said.

In Kobane, a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb at a checkpoint, killing two members of Kurdish security forces, according to Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Kobane has been a symbol of resistance against the jihadists since IS fighters were driven out by Syrian Kurdish forces in January. Turkey's Kurds were frustrated at the time at Ankara's refusal to intervene to quash the IS insurgents, who have seized large parts of Syria and Iraq over the past year.

But in recent weeks, security forces have arrested dozens of IS militants and sympathisers in the most significant action by Ankara against the jihadists. "It's now obvious that the Turkish government has upgraded the threat posed by ISIS to among the top ones it is facing," a Western diplomat told AFP last week. Turkey has also boosted its border defences, stationing tanks and anti-aircraft missiles there as well as bolstering troop numbers.

The build-up has fed speculation that the government is planning to intervene in Syria to push IS jihadists back from the border and halt the advance of Kurdish forces who have made gains against the extremists. Davutoglu has however ruled out any immediate action in Syria. Turkey has

been accused of tolerating or even aiding IS in the early stages of its existence as a useful ally against Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, whom Erdogan wants ousted.

Officials fiercely dismiss the criticism that Ankara is not doing enough to halt the flow of militants across the 911-km border and say Turkey has deported more than 1,500 IS suspects and banned nearly 15,000 people from 98 countries from entering. Ankara has categorised IS as a terrorist group since Oct 2013. But Turkey has been a reluctant member of the anti-IS coalition led by the United States and refused to give its NATO ally the green-light for the use of Incirlik air base in the south for bombings against jihadist targets.

In January, Kurdish forces backed by rebel groups and US-led air strikes had pushed IS out of Kobane after four months of fierce fighting in a hugely symbolic defeat for the Islamists. The Islamists made a surprise raid on Kobane last month but the fighters were driven back by Kurdish forces. Suruc, once a centre of silk-making, is home to one of the biggest refugee camps in Turkey housing Syrians who have fled the bloody four-year conflict at home. The camp shelters about 35,000 refugees out of a total of more than 1.8 million refugees taken in by Turkey since 2011. — AFP

# CUBA FLAG FLIES IN US AS TIES RESTORED

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At the US embassy in Havana however, where some 360 people including 30 Americans are employed, there were few outward signs yesterday of its new status. No US flag will fly over the building on Havana's waterfront Malecon until Kerry arrives. US charge d'affaires Jeffrey DeLaurentis will stay in post in Havana until a new ambassador is confirmed, with his Cuban counterpart Jose Cabanas also staying in place in Washington. In another historic move, Kerry received Rodriguez for talks yesterday - the first time a top Cuban diplomat has visited the State Department since 1958.

The move has been hailed by Cubans, hoping to see an easing of tough economic conditions. "It's a day to be celebrated, it's an important day that will bring new opportunities," said 18-year-old Cuban Adriel Gonzales, who had the honor of raising the Cuban flag outside the US embassy in Havana. But

both nations have cautioned that this is only a beginning, warning that overcoming decades of enmity is not easy.

"Cuba needs the United States as an economic engine for its troubled economy and hopes to attract new foreign investment and human capital to update its socialist model, but without undergoing political reform," analyst Ted Piccone from the Brookings Institution told AFP. "Building confidence and trust will be critical to the ability to move forward," he added.

One of the biggest areas of contention remains human rights, with Washington pressing for an improvement in freedoms of expression, religion and the press in the Caribbean island nation. Some Republicans have been sharply critical of what they see as US haste to cozy up with Cuba. Senator and 2016 presidential hopeful Marco Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, vowed on Sunday to end diplomatic ties with an "anti-American communist tyranny". "This recognition somehow sends a

message to dissidents and others around the world that the United States accepts the Cuban form of government today as a legitimate form of government," he told CNN's "State of the Union." Another tough issue is compensation for American property seized after the 1959 Cuban revolution led by Fidel Castro. Some 5,911 lawsuits have been opened in the United States seeking an estimated \$7 billion to \$8 billion. On Havana's side, Raul Castro has urged Obama to use his executive powers to "dismantle" the economic embargo in place for more than 50 years, calling it the main stumbling block toward normalization.

Washington also wants to ensure the return of several American fugitives wanted in the United States. Tough negotiations eased one stumbling block with the Cuban security presence outside the US embassy in Havana already reduced. And while American diplomats would still have to provide notification of their travel, they will no longer have to seek permission. — AFP

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