

# The Saudi Problem and the Head of the Snake

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Articles & Testimony

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## Does Obama still have pull over Riyadh when the king's point man -- Prince Bandar -- is pulling the strings from afar?

**T**he key figure in U.S.-Saudi relations wasn't present when President Barack Obama met with King Abdullah on Friday, March 28, but his spirit undoubtedly dominated the meeting. Prince Bandar bin Sultan -- the nephew of the Saudi monarch, the head of Saudi intelligence, and a former long-serving ambassador to Washington -- was probably still in Morocco, where he has been recovering from surgery to his shoulder. But despite rumors to the contrary, he remains the key player in the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Bandar's disappearance a couple of months ago was spun by U.S. officials as the sidelining of a fading, volatile figure whose views on Iran and the civil war in Syria were irritatingly incompatible with the U.S. perspective. The reality is that Bandar is still the point person for Saudi policy on Syria, even as his cousin, Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, coordinates with the United States. And from Riyadh's point of view, if the man once termed "Bandar Bush" for his closeness to Republican circles of power gives the Obama administration heartburn, that's just too bad.

Bandar's persistent strength is that he is the enabler of King Abdullah's vision for his kingdom and the Middle East. The monarch wants Syria's Bashar al-Assad overthrown, Iran's Hezbollah surrogates contained, and the "head of the snake" -- Iran, in the king's view -- cut off. While Bandar deals with the specifics, it's the king who sets the broad course of Saudi policy and may even be more hawkish than his intelligence chief. Compared with the king, Bandar is a self-described "pussy cat."

Previous meetings between Obama and King Abdullah have proved to be a political and diplomatic minefield. Their first meeting, in April 2009, produced the famous video of Obama allegedly bowing to the king, which his critics seized upon as evidence that the president was being overly obsequious to the monarch. Two months later, Obama stopped in Riyadh before making his famous speech in Cairo, which promised a "new beginning" to American relations with the Muslim and Arab worlds after the Bush-era invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. At this meeting,

Obama asked King Abdullah to allow overflight rights to Israeli passenger jets heading to Asia, as a gesture to kick-start the Middle East peace process. Annoyed at this request being sprung on him without proper preparation -- an early indication of the naivete of the Obama team -- Abdullah gave a curt "no."

The Obama administration's attempted rapprochement with Iran has resulted in further headaches with Riyadh. King Abdullah was upset about the terms of the interim nuclear deal signed with Tehran, and he let Secretary of State John Kerry know it during a terrible meeting the two held in November. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal noted in the news conference immediately afterward that "a true relationship between friends is based on sincerity, candor and frankness." That's diplomatic code for saying it was a shouting match. Apparently, King Abdullah did the "plain speaking," and Kerry had to listen -- for a couple of hours.

Both sides had an impressive laundry list of issues for this round of talks. Riyadh is concerned with the Iranian nuclear file, the Syrian uprising, Iranian subversion in Bahrain and the oil-rich Saudi Eastern Province, and supporting the military-backed regime in Egypt. Washington takes a different view on each of these topics and also wanted to add a few more issues to the agenda -- most notably, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and women's rights within the kingdom.

The Obama administration wants Saudi Arabia's continuing support-cum-pressure on Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the Middle East peace process. Despite the kingdom's coldness to Israel, its 2002 Arab Peace Initiative explicitly backs a two-state solution -- and the White House wants to make sure it puts those words into action. Political reforms at home, meanwhile, could help suggest that the kingdom is not opposed to the demise of rigid autocracies across the Middle East -- though this is probably a forlorn hope. Saudi Arabia's ban on allowing women to drive continues to lead many Americans to question their country's close relationship with the kingdom -- and female Saudi activists are planning to flout the law again on Saturday in another "drive day."

Bandar is so crucial to Saudi policy precisely because the king does not believe Washington will deliver on the issues that matter most to Riyadh. Saudi Arabia is gravely concerned by perceived U.S. weakness -- whether it's being made to look like a loser by Russian President Vladimir Putin in Crimea or standing idly by while Assad regains the momentum in his country's civil war. If Washington is absent, the kingdom needs its own fix-it man to protect its regional interests.

King Abdullah sees Iran as the root of all trouble in the Middle East -- and he wants his Persian rival cut back to size so it is not a quasi-hegemonic power in the Persian Gulf and its support for Assad results in a bloody nose. Apart from strong words, the Saudi monarch may also use threats: After all, he can always go to Islamabad for a few nuclear weapons to bolster the kingdom's sense of security. Such an option directly conflicts with Obama's supposed core foreign-policy issue -- nuclear nonproliferation -- but there is little Washington can really do other than saying it would be very upset.

Saudi Arabia could also tweak Washington by increasing its support to Islamist militias in Syria, which have proved more effective than moderate rebel forces. Bandar has referred to these nasty fighters as "cut-throat sons of bitches." Saudi Arabia has recently banned its citizens from going to fight in Syria, so these SOBs may have to come from somewhere else. The Obama administration is gravely worried that over 1,000 of them hold U.S. or European passports and could someday come home -- fired up with Islamist fervor and training and eager to take their jihad to the West.

This is a lot to cram into what was likely no more than a two-hour meeting. King Abdullah is 91 years old this year, and he tires easily these days -- he is overweight and cannot stand without a walker. As reports come out, it will be interesting to see who else was in the room, apart from the Saudi ambassador to Washington, Adel al-Jubeir, the king's favorite English-language interpreter. One revealing indicator will be the interaction -- or lack thereof --

between Obama and the king's 77-year-old half brother, Crown Prince Salman. The next prince in line for the throne has just returned from a hectic series of official visits to Pakistan, Japan, India, the Maldives, and China, and he is rumored to be less cogent than King Abdullah. Indeed, a royal decree announced on March 27 that his younger half brother, Muqrin, had been named to a new post of deputy crown prince, perhaps marginalizing Salman.

Being Saudi Arabia's king in waiting, however, does not mean that Salman will be the future leader. The White House is sensitive to this -- so look for who else Obama spends time with. Whoever it is, it won't be Bandar, neither as conversationalist with the U.S. president nor as the leader of his country. But as Bandar is the man to watch today, a new generation of royals will be needed to guide Saudi Arabia through the tumultuous years ahead.

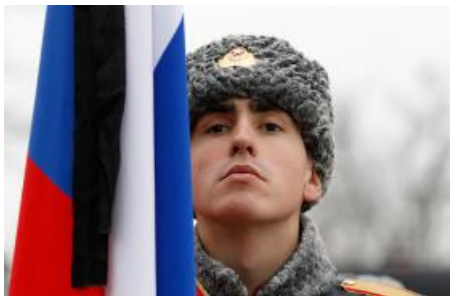
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