

# 'No One in the Region Will Sleep'

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Nov 25, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## The Saudis are frustrated by their inability to block what they regard as Iran's return to diplomatic respectability and Washington's conciliatory approach to Tehran.

**S**o, how are the Saudis reacting? That's the question on many people's lips now that world powers have arrived at a nuclear deal with Iran. The simple answer is that they are probably as confused as the rest of us as they work out what the parties have agreed to and what they have conceded. But when you're sitting across the Persian Gulf from Iran -- a divide that mirrors the division between Sunni and Shiite Islam in the region -- things look different than when you're discussing the talks around a coffee machine here in the United States. The Saudis see the negotiations as power politics played as a zero-sum game. A perceived victory for Iran, even a reprieve from tougher action, is to the disadvantage of the kingdom.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is likely exasperated by the agreement and the Obama administration's celebrations of it. How do I know? Because the king left Riyadh on Monday for the desert oasis of Rawdhat Khuraim. It's the place he goes when he needs to relax. At 90 years old, he tires easily but has spent the last couple of weeks lobbying everyone who visits him -- including the interim president of Egypt and the emirs of Kuwait and Qatar -- on the dangers posed by Iran, which will, in his mind, become intolerable if it achieves even the perception of being a nuclear power, as such a distinction will bequeath hegemonic status on Tehran not only in the Gulf but also across the Middle East. Earlier this month, after the collapse of the first round of Geneva talks with Iran, the king gave Secretary of State John Kerry an ear-bashing that by some accounts went on for two hours.

The official Saudi line on the nuclear deal emerged on Monday when the Saudi Council of Ministers, the kingdom's cabinet, held its weekly meeting. A report on the proceedings, released by the Saudi Press Agency, was written in the news outlet's usual anodyne prose, noting that "the Cabinet reviewed a number of reports on the development of the situations at regional and international arenas" before continuing: "The Kingdom viewed the agreement as a

primary step towards a comprehensive solution to the Iranian nuclear program. As far as good intentions are provided and as long as it concludes to a Middle East and Gulf region free of all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. Hoping that such a step will be followed by more important steps leading to guarantee the right for all countries in the region to peacefully use nuclear energy."

The translation is awkward, but the operative phrase is "as far as good intentions are provided." The problem for King Abdullah and the other members of the House of Saud, as well as most Saudis, is that they don't trust Iran in the diplomatic sphere and they don't trust Shiites religiously.

The Saudis are sufficiently sensitive to Western good manners to avoid making anti-Shiite remarks in English (in public, at least). But fearing the worst from the Geneva talks, Saudi officials have spent the past several days whipping up concern in New York, Washington, and London.

Holding forth in the *Wall Street Journal's* premier "Weekend Interview" slot on November 23, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz said his country was putting "maximum pressure now on the United States not to succumb to the president of Iran's soft talk." The billionaire businessman, who is not normally given license by Riyadh to talk about political issues, pleaded, "The U.S. has to have a foreign policy. Well-defined, well-structured. You don't have it right now, unfortunately. It's just completely chaos, confusion. No policy. I mean, we feel it. We sense it, you know."

Saudi princes and officials often cast Israel as the villain of the Middle East, implying and often saying outright that if it were not for the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, everything in the region would be fine. Prince Alwaleed skipped this line of argument completely, instead saying, "For the first time, Saudi Arabian interests and Israel are almost parallel. It's incredible."

Incredulity is also a good word to sum up the feelings at a roundtable in Washington D.C. that I attended a few days earlier, when U.S. officials, military officers, and think tankers questioned another prominent Saudi personality. Asked what the kingdom would do if Israeli aircraft flew over Saudi Arabia on their way to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities, the Saudi, whose remarks were off the record, replied: "Nothing. Why would we do anything? They would be doing what we want to happen." Of course, after a pause, he added, "But we would issue a strong public note of condemnation for the intrusion into air space when it was all over."

Last Friday, the *Times* of London was granted a rare interview with the Saudi ambassador to London, Prince Mohammad bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz, who said "all options are available" if world powers failed to curb Iran's nuclear program. He hasn't been quoted since, but it's safe to assume his sentiments have not been assuaged by the agreement in Geneva. Meanwhile, his embassy has issued a visa to the Middle East editor of the *Guardian* newspaper -- a left-wing daily that is often critical of the kingdom's policies -- indicating near-desperation to get its message across.

So, what will the Saudis do now? On Sunday, Abdullah al-Askar, the chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the country's consultative council (a talking shop rather than a quasi-parliament), was quoted in the Saudi English-language newspaper *Arab News* as saying that the "government of Iran, month after month, has proven that it has an ugly agenda in the region, and in this regard, no one in the region will sleep and assume things are going smoothly." Asked whether, if the deal failed to prevent Iran from building a bomb, it would spark a nuclear arms race in the region, al-Askar responded, "I think Saudi Arabia will go ahead if Iran goes ahead [and gets a nuclear weapon]. I think Egypt, maybe Turkey, maybe the UAE, would go ahead and acquire the same technology."

The Saudis are frustrated by their inability to block what they regard as Iran's return to diplomatic respectability and Washington's conciliatory approach to Tehran. They are also concerned that in Syria, the Assad regime will survive, giving Iran a strategic victory rather than the setback that Riyadh has been trying to orchestrate through its support of jihadi opposition fighters in the country. Last month, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the Saudi intelligence

chief, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, had warned that the kingdom would turn away from the United States because it felt at odds with the Obama administration. Washington insiders ridiculed the notion, arguing that Riyadh had nowhere else to turn. That proposition may very well be tested soon.

Among the *wadis* of Rawdhat Khuraim, which are now full of greenery from the winter rains, King Abdullah will be considering his options. It will be a working break. He has taken some of his closest advisors with him, including his son, Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, his favorite son-in-law, Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Mohammad, and his second deputy prime minister, Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz. The king is renowned for speaking his mind. So far, however, it's his subordinates who have spoken out for him in public. Perhaps we're about to hear from the monarch himself.

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