

Saudi 'Hidden Hand' Steering Iran Nuclear Talks?

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

The first round of Iran nuclear talks in Geneva broke down earlier this month after the P5+1 failed to reach consensus on a short-term deal that would have eased up sanctions and allowed Iran to continue enriching uranium at reduced levels. Talks apparently ended over France's demand that Iran stop construction on a heavy water reactor at Arak, and there has been speculation that Saudi Arabia, along with Israel, may have been the 'hidden hand' guiding the course of negotiations. VOA's Cecily Hilleary asked Simon Henderson of The Washington Institute's Gulf and Energy Policy Program about Saudi Arabia's possible role in the impasse.

Henderson: The Saudis, curiously, have much the same position as Israel. They feel threatened by Iran. They feel that they will be even more threatened by a nuclear Iran. They don't believe Iranian protestations that their nuclear program is for civilian purposes. And they are uncertain with the position of the U.S. and are very concerned that the U.S. is going to enter into a bad deal. And so less noticeably, perhaps, than [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu, but not invisibly, the Saudis have been very active in lobbying in the absence of the U.S., where they seem to have given up, they've certainly been lobbying the French and, one can assume, the British and other significant groups as well.

Hilleary: What do you know about their talks with the French?

Henderson: Well, there are a number of little data points on this. One would have been the story which appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on October 21st saying, "Saudi Spy Chief Breaks with the U.S." That was Prince Bandar speaking to "European diplomats." The "European diplomat" involved was the French ambassador. I mean, he hasn't said so. The *Wall Street Journal* hasn't revealed it. But I'm told it was the French ambassador.

And in the reporting which followed that and I'm not quite sure how it was sourced, responding to the question -- and I'm not sure exactly how it was asked of him -- "If you're not going to work with the U.S., who the hell are you going to work with?" The answer was France and Jordan. That was clearly an answer which probably applies in particular to Syria. And so that's one piece of information.

A second piece of information is that in the beginning of October -- October 7th or 8th -- the French defense minister went to Jeddah, and that was seen as an effort to secure a new defense contract. And he arrived on the same day as the visit from the Egyptian interim president, Adly Mansour, who was, in Saudi terms, clearly the more important, because the Saudis are delighted that Morsi's gone in Cairo and have endorsed the new regime. But despite it having therefore been a busy day for King Abdullah, Abdullah also saw the French defense minister. So this was, I thought,

noteworthy.

And then [U.S. Secretary of State John] Kerry also on October 21st had lunch with [Saudi Foreign Minister] Saud al Faisal in Paris, and news that Saud al-Faisal was in Paris, as well, speaking to the French, and so these things all sort of fit together. It's not often that you can see the footprints to a murder scene, but in this case, you can -- if you like my metaphor.

Hilleary: What about Saudi Arabia and Israel? They are certainly odd bedfellows, but they've been getting cozier and cozier, at least in terms of their opposition to Iran. Is there communication between the two on this issue?

Henderson: No, there's been no reported coordination between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but everyone assumes that there is. I know, indeed have written, quite a few years ago, that in the late 1990s, the Saudis and Israel developed a back-channel intelligence link, the proverbial red telephone situation whereby even if they didn't like each other and they didn't agree with each other, they could at least tell each other why they didn't agree with each other, rather than have the information pass through third parties. I've got no doubt that there's probably an improved level of communication, i.e., not just at the intelligence level, but at a political level, so that both sides get a sense of what the political leadership of each country is thinking.

The Israelis also have a sort of under-the-radar relationship with the UAE, and that's been going on for some time and has only been reinforced by the UAE's perception of Iran.

Hilleary: There are really two basic questions, at this point. On November 20, the P5+1 are going to try and resume talks again. That gives Saudi and Israel ten more days to "wreak havoc." The first question is, are their doubts and fears legitimate in your eyes? And second, what can we expect to see over the next couple of weeks?

Henderson: Well, yes, in fact, the calendar for the next couple of weeks is, in fact, busier than that. It is noteworthy that Yukiya Amano, who's the head of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) was in Tehran and signed this agreement. But what the agreement doesn't cover is another aspect which the IAEA have been pressuring Iran on, which is to resolve something which the IAEA calls "possible military aspects." It essentially means, "What the hell were the Iranians doing at Parchin?" The Iranians say they were doing nothing. The IAEA's position, "That's fine. Come along, let's find the nothing." And the Iranians say, "There's nothing there, there's nothing to look at," which isn't a terribly satisfactory situation.

The other thing at the end of the month is there's the next meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors in Vienna, where Iran will again be discussed. That's on November the 28th. Discussion will essentially focus on the latest IAEA report on Iran, which will be distributed to the member governments in advance of that meeting, and although it's meant to be confidential, it's leaked within mini-seconds. And the timing when it comes out is usually ten days in advance -- on the 18th or so -- which is interesting because it's ahead of the 20th and 21st, the next round of Geneva talks. One can only guess, but if they've installed more centrifuges -- because at the moment, they've installed about 19,000 and are working about 10,000, of which 1,000 are the improved IR2ms. If these numbers have changed -- and frankly, they will probably only change upwards -- this will be an indication of their progress and possibly an indication of their good intentions -- although I hesitate to say "good intentions" because I take a rather jaundiced view and I don't think they've got good intentions. But who knows? They might be clever enough to actually not install any more and have fewer working, which will only confuse us even more.

Hilleary: What do we know about Saudi Arabia's nuclear intentions? There have been noises about Saudi Arabia going nuclear with the help of Pakistan, then denials of these reports.

Henderson: Well, one would sort of expect the denials, at least from Pakistan. Saudi Arabia made a statement, but it's not a denial, which they gave to the BBC on the day of the broadcast of the program (BBC Newsnight, Nov. 6), because the BBC said, "We're going to broadcast this program tonight. What have you got to say about it?" And so

they released this statement. If you read it, it's not a denial. And so, that's, I think, an interesting comment.

I'm absolutely convinced such an arrangement exists. The way I have described it in the past is an understanding. Perhaps better than understanding. Somebody corrected me the other day and said there's an MOU -- a memorandum of understanding -- which suggests a physical written document. I have to track that aspect down. But as far as I'm concerned, this is the way the two countries think, and we know they think this way, and we'd like to dampen this story down, because if Saudi Arabia does go nuclear or has a fudged status, then it changes the Middle East and makes U.S. diplomacy even more difficult.

Hilleary: But is it just a threat to stop Iran -- or do you think they are committed to it? I mean as long as Israel has nuclear weapons, every other "kid on the block" is going to want them.

Henderson: Well, yes, but the answer to that point is that Israel has had nuclear weapons since probably the late 1960s and certainly the early 1970s. And yet Saudi Arabia is only thinking about doing it now, or perhaps has only been thinking about doing it for the last ten years. In other words, the thinking about doing it was in response to Iran, rather than to Israel. So okay, I know [former Iraqi leader] Saddam [Hussein] went for nukes and I know [former Libyan leader Moammar] Gadhafi was playing but in a sense, the fact it was Saddam and the fact it was Gadhafi sort of proves my point: Madmen will always go for nuclear weapons. And so the Israelis would say, "With madmen like that around, we need them." But with more sensible countries, they perhaps won't.

Hilleary: The irony here is that the biggest opponents to this nuclear agreement are the ones that would profit most by a non-nuclear Iran. Israel and Saudi Arabia are the biggest opponents. If a deal is not made, how much more dangerous does their neighborhood become?

Henderson: Oh, it becomes hugely dangerous. At the moment, you see, we are not talking about a deal. We're talking about a negotiation, [...] a framework. And the Israeli position in the sense that Netanyahu has said much more publically than anyone else, similar to the French, that this is much easier on the Iranians.

And my personal view is that it is. I mean in order to go forward in negotiations, we are sort of buying the Iranian narrative, which is, "Our program is peaceful. It's always been peaceful. We've never got any intentions that it should be anything other than peaceful. So accept that and we will perhaps negotiate it that you can come in and check that that's the case." But, in fact, in order to do that, we're going to have to remove sanctions, or some of them.

There's a piece in the *Weekly Standard* by Elliott Abrams, who is quoting from an American diplomatic cable which was first released by the *New York Times*. It dates from just before the [U.S.] embassy was seized in Tehran when the then charge d'affaires wrote a memo back to the State Department about what it was like to negotiate with the new revolutionary regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, and it still reads extraordinarily well. And indeed, Elliot Abrams has a point to make here. But, frankly, on the basis of the memo he's reporting, I think it's a legitimate point.

Hilleary: So what's the takeaway? Will we see any interim agreement in November or is this going to be squashed?

Henderson: I think what Israel wants, what France wants, what Saudi Arabia wants, what the Emiratis want, is some sort of maintenance of the front that Iran is up to no good, rather than the sort of, "We can only make this work if we assume that Iran is being innocent and we're just trying to get measures to confirm their innocence." This, to these countries, comes over as being hopelessly naive.

Now what about the other countries? Britain? I'm not sure where it's standing on that. I'm not sure where Germany is standing either. China and Russia like the P5 setup because it confers world status on them, but I don't think they've got any particular moral principles at stake. And the U.S. position is I think rather -- certainly optimistic and open to the additional description of being naively optimistic. ❖

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