

The U.S.-Saudi Royal Rumble

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Articles & Testimony

In the wake of recent tensions, the House of Saud could make things very unpleasant for Washington in these seven ways.

What is happening to the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia? Even after loud complaints from top Saudi officials that the longtime alliance was on the rocks, the response of official Washington, outside the punditocracy, was an almost audible yawn.

President Barack Obama's administration should not be so quick to dismiss the trouble the Saudis could cause for the United States in the Middle East -- or the Saudi royals' determination to cause a shift in U.S. policy. Two articles this month quoted unidentified "European diplomats" who had been briefed by Saudi intelligence maestro Prince Bandar bin Sultan that Riyadh was so upset with Washington that it was undertaking a "major shift" in relations.

Saudi Arabia has a litany of complaints about U.S. policy in the Middle East. It faults Washington for pursuing a rapprochement with Iran, for not pushing Israel harder in peace talks with the Palestinians, and for not more forcefully backing efforts to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Saudi royals are also angry that the United States did not stand behind Saudi support for Bahrain when it crushed an anti-government uprising in 2011, and that Washington has criticized the new Egyptian government, another Saudi ally, for its crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood protesters.

Saudi royals have evidently decided that public comments and policy shifts are the only way to convince Washington to alter what they see as its errant path. Bandar's declaration came a few days after the kingdom abruptly decided to reject its election to the UN Security Council, claiming it could not tolerate that body's "double standards." As Bandar helpfully pointed out, the incident was "a message for the U.S., not the UN."

According to an official in Washington, Bandar's "briefing" was actually a several hour conversation with French Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Bertrand Besancenot, who then shared his notes with his European colleagues.

Whether Bandar intended to leak his remarks to the media is unclear but the Saudis haven't done anything to wind

back his message. Last week, former intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal made many of the same points in an address to the annual Arab-U.S. Policymakers Conference in Washington.

It is hard to judge the significance of Prince Turki's remarks, because he was essentially fired as ambassador to Washington in 2007 after falling out with King Abdullah. With a nod toward candor, he made it clear he doesn't have a role in the Saudi government and claimed not to be privy to its official deliberations. However, given his apparent place on the kingdom's limited bench of officials who can explain its stances to the world, Prince Turki's remarks can't be ignored. As he put it, Saudi Arabia "is a peninsula, not an island."

This is far from the first crisis the U.S.-Saudi alliance has experienced. In early 1939, a Saudi delegation went to Nazi Germany to negotiate an arms agreement, part of which would have been diverted to Palestinian Arabs fighting Jewish immigrants in the British mandate of Palestine. At least some of the Saudi group met Adolf Hitler at his mountain top hideaway at Berchtesgaden.

German arms never reached the kingdom -- or Palestine -- as the Saudis could not afford to consummate the deal (that was in the days before the oil revenues started flowing in). However, King Abdullah still treasures a dagger given as a gift from the Fuhrer himself, and occasionally shows it off to guests. Visiting U.S. officials are briefed in advance so they can display appropriate diplomatic sangfroid if Abdullah points out the memento.

But despite the multitude of crises -- from the 9/11 hijackers to Saudi pay-offs to Osama bin Laden -- past difficulties have been quietly repaired. The operative word here is "quietly" -- usually, the general public has not even known of the crisis. The difference now is that, through Saudi Arabia's move at the United Nations and Bandar's briefing, the kingdom is all but trumpeting its displeasure.

Assuming that the Saudi-U.S. relationship is really heading off course, what could go wrong this time? Here are seven nightmare scenarios that should keep officials in the State Department and Pentagon up at night.

1. Saudi Arabia uses the oil weapon. The kingdom could cut back its production, which has been boosted to over 10 million barrels/day at Washington's request, to make up for the fall in Iranian exports caused by sanctions. Riyadh enjoys the revenues generated by higher production, but price hikes caused by tightening supply could more than compensate the kingdom. Meanwhile, a drop in supply will cause the price at the gas pump to spike in the United States -- endangering the economic recovery and having an almost immediate impact on domestic public opinion.

2. Saudi Arabia reaches out to Pakistan for nuclear-tipped missiles. Riyadh has long had an interest in Islamabad's nuclear program: The kingdom allegedly partially funded Pakistan's pursuit of a nuclear weapon. In 1999, then Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan was welcomed by Pakistani Premier Nawaz Sharif to the Kahuta plant, where Pakistan produces highly enriched uranium. After being overthrown by the military later the same year, Sharif is now back again as prime minister -- after spending years in exile in Saudi Arabia.

While Islamabad would not want to get in between Riyadh and Tehran, the arrangement could be financially lucrative. It would also help Pakistan out-flank India: If part of Islamabad's nuclear arsenal was in the kingdom, it would effectively make it immune from Indian attack.

Alternatively, the kingdom could declare the intention of building a uranium enrichment plant to match Iranian nuclear ambitions -- to which, in Riyadh's view, Washington appears to be acquiescing. As King Abdullah told senior U.S. diplomat Dennis Ross in April 2009, "If they get nuclear weapons, we will get nuclear weapons."

3. Riyadh helps kick the United States out of Bahrain. When Bahrain was rocked by protests in 2011, Saudi Arabia led an intervention by Gulf states to reinforce the royal family's grip on the throne. The Saudis have the leverage, therefore, to encourage Bahrain to force the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet to leave its headquarters in Manama, from which the United States projects power across the Persian Gulf.

It wouldn't be a hard sell: Hardline Bahraini royals are already fed up with American criticism of their domestic crackdown on Shiites protesting for more rights. But it would be a hard landing for U.S. power projection in the Middle East: The current arrangements for the Fifth Fleet would be hard to reproduce in any other Gulf sheikhdom. And it's not without some precedent. Riyadh forced the United States out of its own Prince Sultan air base 10 years ago.

4. The kingdom supplies new and dangerous weaponry to the Syrian rebels. The Saudis are already expanding their intervention against President Bashar al-Assad's regime, funneling money and arms to hardline Salafist groups across Syria. But they have so far heeded U.S. warnings not to supply the rebels with certain weapons -- most notably portable surface-to-air missile systems, which could not only bring down Assad's warplanes but also civilian airliners.

Saudi Arabia could potentially end its ban on sending rebel groups these weapons systems -- and obscure the origins of the missiles, to avoid direct blame for any of the havoc they cause.

5. The Saudis support a new intifada in the Palestinian territories. Riyadh has long been vocal about its frustrations with the lack of progress on an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal. Palestine was the top reason given in the official Saudi statement rejecting the UN Security Council seat. The issue is also close to Abdullah's heart -- in 2001, he declined an invitation to Washington due to lack of U.S. pressure on Israel. What's more, Riyadh knows that playing the "Arab" card would be popular at home and across the region.

If Saudi Arabia truly feels that the prospect for a negotiated settlement is irreparably stalled, it could quietly empower violent forces in the West Bank that could launch attacks against Israeli forces and settlers -- fatally wounding the current mediation efforts led by Secretary of State John Kerry.

6. Riyadh boosts the military-led regime in Egypt. The House of Saud has already turned into one of Egypt's primary patrons, pledging \$5 billion in assistance immediately after the military toppled former President Mohamed Morsy. Such support has allowed Egypt's new rulers to ignore Washington's threats that it would cut off aid due to the government's violent crackdown on protesters.

By deepening its support, Saudi Arabia could further undermine Washington's attempt to steer Cairo back toward democratic rule. As Cairo moves toward a referendum over a new constitution, as well as parliamentary and presidential elections, Gulf support could convince the generals to rig the votes against the Muslim Brotherhood, and violently crush any opposition to their rule.

7. Saudi Arabia presses for an "Islamic seat" on the UN Security Council. The kingdom has long voiced its discontent for the way power is doled out in the world's most important security body. The leaders of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a bloc of 57 member states designed to represent Muslim issues in global affairs, has called for such an "Islamic seat."

The United States and other veto-wielding countries, of course, can be counted on to oppose any effort that would diminish their power in the Security Council. But even if the Saudi plan fails, the kingdom could depict U.S. opposition as anti-Islamic. Such an effort would wreck America's image in the Middle East, and provide dangerous fodder for Sunni extremists already hostile to the United States.

Washington insiders will no doubt see any of these potential Saudi policies as self-defeating. However, it would be a mistake to ignore Riyadh's frustration: While Washington thinks it can call the Saudis' bluff, top officials in the kingdom also appear to believe that the United States is bluffing about its commitment to a range of decisions antagonistic to Saudi interests. The big difference is that the tension in the relationship is the No. 1 priority in Saudi Arabia -- but is way down near the bottom of the Obama administration's list of concerns.

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