Spat or Split? Saudi Arabia's Diplomatic Anger with Washington

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

Oct 23, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

The kingdom's rejection of a Security Council seat has fueled predictions of a major and perhaps rapid shift in bilateral relations.

Saudi Arabia's abrupt October 17 decision to refuse a seat on the UN Security Council -- an unprecedented occurrence -- has generated international bewilderment and concern about the mechanics of the kingdom's foreign policy. The sense of crisis was increased by reports on October 22 that Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan had warned European diplomats of a potential "major shift" in relations with the United States, due primarily to Washington's perceived inaction on Syria and overtures to Iran. Yet the seriousness of such threats is uncertain, and timely U.S. diplomatic outreach may help defuse the situation.

UNPRECEDENTED DISCONTENT?

Crises have occurred before in the longstanding U.S.-Saudi relationship, such as Riyadh's leadership of the 1973 Arab oil embargo in protest of U.S. support for Israel, and the involvement of so many Saudi hijackers in the September 11 attacks. The latest spike in tensions stems from a number of issues, however.

From the Saudi perspective, the Arab uprisings that swept the region over the past three years have traded stability for chaos. That is why Riyadh gave ousted Tunisian leader Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali asylum and chastised Washington for its sudden withdrawal of support for Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak in 2011. And when the Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo was overthrown this June, Riyadh rejoiced and promptly heaped financial support on the new military-backed administration, ignoring Washington's less favorable view of the change.

Parallel to these events, the Saudis have grown increasingly wary of U.S. policy on Syria and Iran. Riyadh has been frustrated at President Obama's decision to back away from a punitive military strike on Syria after Bashar al-Assad's regime used chemical weapons against his own people. As for Iran, the kingdom is more concerned than

ever about the regime's efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability, and it doubts Washington's promises to use force if necessary to prevent that outcome. Even if U.S.-led nuclear talks with Iran succeed, Riyadh is worried that they will have the consequence (intended or not) of casting Iran as the hegemonic power in the Persian Gulf. Despite these anxieties, the kingdom has been a crucial partner in U.S. policy toward Iran, expanding its own oil production in order to negate any deleterious global economic effects stemming from heightened sanctions (e.g., potential supply shortfalls caused by forced cutbacks in Iranian oil exports).

Against this backdrop, the Saudi moves of the past several days were completely unexpected, though Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal's refusal to speak to the UN General Assembly on October 1 may have provided an early clue. At the time, one Reuters report described the prince's decision as "an unprecedented statement of discontent" by a government that "usually expresses diplomatic concerns only in private." The story also quoted an unidentified diplomat as saying that "the Saudi decision...reflects the kingdom's dissatisfaction with the position of the UN on Arab and Islamic issues, particularly the issue of Palestine that the UN has not been able to solve in more than 60 years, as well as the Syrian crisis."

The Foreign Ministry used similar language in an October 18 communique following the U-turn on the UN seat, criticizing the Security Council's "double standards," its lack of progress on Palestine, and its failure to eliminate weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. The statement also denounced the use of chemical weapons by the "ruling regime" in Syria "while the world stands idly [by]."

Such language is typical of past Foreign Ministry statements about regional problems and, more important, reflects the reported views of King Abdullah himself. Only the Saudi monarch could have made such an abrupt decision on the Security Council seat -- an apparent impetuousness that was in line with his reputation for straight-talking and, perhaps, his natural cantankerousness as a ninety-year-old ruler.

Although these statements were directed at the UN, the true target of the kingdom's frustration is the United States. As Prince Bandar reportedly put it, turning down the council seat "is a message for the U.S., not the U.N."

BANDAR'S THREATS

According to yesterday's reports by the Wall Street Journal and Reuters -- both of which quoted unidentified European diplomats briefed by Prince Bandar -- Saudi Arabia will no longer coordinate with Washington on the arming and training of Sunni rebel groups in Syria. This suggests that Riyadh will supply more advanced weapons and be even less restrained in supporting radical jihadist groups whose views are inimical to the United States.

In addition, the kingdom reportedly does not want to remain "dependent" on Washington, and it could adopt policies that affect "arms purchases and oil sales" (though no details were given on these matters). The Reuters story also noted Prince Bandar's disappointment that Washington had failed to back the Saudis in supporting Bahrain's 2011 crackdown on antigovernment protestors. And the Wall Street Journal quoted him as saying the kingdom would work more closely with France and Jordan instead.

How these sentiments translate into actual policy remains to be seen, but Saudi diplomacy with other governments has been relatively vigorous over the past two weeks. On October 9, King Abdullah welcomed Egyptian interim president Adly Mansour to the Red Sea port of Jeddah; the French defense minister visited the same day. And on October 21, he hosted a joint meeting with King Abdullah of Jordan and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi, which shares Riyadh's hatred of the Muslim Brotherhood and suspicions of Iran. Prince Bandar attended the latter meeting, suggesting that the conversation focused on Syria and support for anti-Assad fighters being trained in Jordan.

KEY SAUDI PLAYERS

Given the Saudi monarch's age and relative infirmity, one could rightfully question his actual determination to alter the kingdom's foreign policy and loosen ties with Washington. All of his key advisors know the United States very well, but they are probably just as exasperated by U.S. policy as he is. Currently, this inner circle includes:

- **Prince Saud al-Faisal**: The long-serving, Princeton-educated foreign minister is very close to the king, but his role is limited due to medical problems.
- **Prince Bandar bin Sultan**: The intelligence chief and former U.S.-trained pilot served as ambassador in Washington for twenty-two years; he has maintained influence by demonstrating competence, but the king does not fully trust him.
- **Prince Mitab bin Abdullah**: Head of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and the king's eldest son.
- **Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz**: The second deputy prime minister (i.e., crown prince-in-waiting) and former F-15 pilot who also served briefly as intelligence chief.
- **Prince Muhammad bin Nayef**: The minister of interior (effectively homeland security) who is judged very capable by his American interlocutors. Sometimes considered a future king, but currently worn down from dealing with Shiite unrest in the oil-rich Eastern Province.
- **Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Muhammad**: Minister of education, married to the king's daughter Adela.
- **Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah**: Deputy foreign minister, son to the king, and former point man on Syria policy.
- **Khaled al-Tuwaijri**: Chief of the king's court, who discerns and relays the king's decisions. Although not a royal, he is a crucial player who has earned the nickname "King Khaled."
- **Salman bin Abdulaziz**: Despite his high public profile, the crown prince and notional defense minister is not a significant player because he is increasingly senile.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Thus far, U.S. officials have reacted to the Security Council incident equanimously, with Secretary of State John Kerry noting that Washington continues to work closely with Saudi Arabia on a range of issues, including Syria. But the United States finds itself without an ambassador in Riyadh at this potentially crucial juncture. Ambassador James Smith, a political appointee, has just returned home after his four-year term, and a new envoy is yet to be named. Although previous bilateral dissonance has been repaired relatively easily, the latest incidents are unusually petulant and public, so Washington should dispatch a team of high-level officials to the kingdom for a full discussion.

Indeed, given the range of issues that a Saudi policy shift could affect, it is important that Washington act promptly to ameliorate or dispel some of Riyadh's recent threats. One place to start is the UN, where protocol was thrown into confusion by the Security Council seat rejection. The two-year term for that seat does not start until January 1, so there is time for the Saudis to reconsider.

To be sure, Bandar's reported threat regarding oil sales is a reminder of the world's continuing dependence on the kingdom's vast hydrocarbon reserves, especially amid the fortieth anniversary of the 1973 embargo. In diplomatic terms, however, the latest Saudi action at the UN was self-defeating, and the backlash may convince Riyadh that other policy changes would be counterproductive as well.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. His publications include the 2009 Institute study **After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia (/policy-analysis/view/after-king-abdullah-succession-in-saudi-arabia)**. ❖

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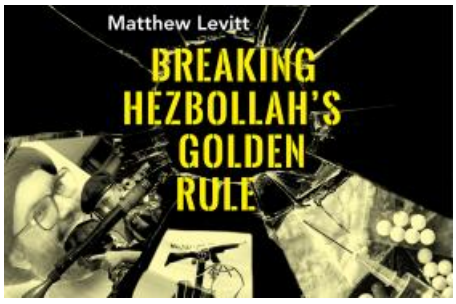

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