

Lines in the Sand? Saudi Arabia's Security Meeting with Iran

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Brief Analysis

In Washington, concern is mounting that Iran's potential for troublemaking will now be countered by Saudi actions, which may escalate rather than quiet regional tensions.

Yesterday, Saudi crown prince Nayef and Iranian minister of intelligence and security Haydar Moslehi held a surprise meeting in Riyadh. In a short announcement, the official Saudi Press Agency stated that the two men had merely "reviewed a number of issues of common concern."

It must have been quite a conversation. Although the two countries still maintain diplomatic relations, the Saudis are at loggerheads with Tehran on a whole series of issues. In particular, they are concerned about Iran's nuclear program and believe Tehran has malevolent intent in Iraq, where U.S. forces are leaving this month, as well as in Bahrain, where near-daily clashes continue between the island's majority Shiite population and the ruling Sunni monarchy's security forces. Additionally, in October, U.S. authorities announced that they had disrupted an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, prompting the kingdom to sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the targeting of diplomats.

Given the gravity of these concerns, Moslehi was the right person to seek out for a top-level discussion. A turbaned cleric, he owes his position to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who is a far more crucial decisionmaker than President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Moslehi's revolutionary credentials are impeccable. Earlier in his career, he served as Khamenei's personal representative to the Basij, the volunteer militia that augments the regime's internal security units. Last month, Basij members ransacked the British embassy in Tehran to protest new financial sanctions.

In addition to being heir apparent, Prince Nayef holds the title of interior minister, giving him control over most of the kingdom's security and intelligence services (Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, who heads the Saudi equivalent of the CIA, was also at the meeting). Nayef is close to members of the Saudi religious establishment and, like them, is

deeply suspicious of Shiites in general and Iran in particular. After minority Saudi Shiites staged riots two months ago, an Interior Ministry official accused them of acting "at the behest of a foreign country that tried to undermine the nation's security in a blatant act of interference" -- a clear reference to Iran. Renewed Shiite demonstrations two weeks ago, in which four people died in clashes with security forces, may have prompted Nayef to demand a meeting with a senior Iranian official to lay down some red lines. For its part, Tehran may have viewed the visit as a means of easing its diplomatic isolation.

Without further details on the meeting, discussion regarding its purpose and tone can only be speculative. Given Nayef's reputation as a hardliner, he likely warned Moslehi of the consequences of Tehran's persistent attempts to extend its influence across the Persian Gulf into the Arab world. Presumably, the Saudis are already prepared to back Iraqi Sunnis in order to weaken the Iranian-backed Shiite government in Baghdad. And in Bahrain, Riyadh's March deployment of riot-control forces and tanks to the island was a clear indication that it would not allow a change in the political status quo.

Coming on the same day that President Obama welcomed Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki to the White House to mark the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the Saudi-Iranian meeting underscored questions about the region's future. The Saudi royal family, which considers Maliki an Iranian stooge, has viewed the Arab Spring revolutions with disquiet, believing that Tehran -- not any lack of political freedom -- is the main threat to stability. Along with other conservative Arab states, the kingdom is perplexed about Washington's support for democratic movements, which they view as a recipe for producing fragile regimes and instability that Iran can exploit.

In Washington, concern is mounting that Iran's potential for troublemaking will now be countered by Saudi actions, which may escalate rather than quiet regional tensions. An early indication of their posture may come at tomorrow's OPEC meeting in Vienna, where the Saudis will likely call for maintaining high oil production levels, while Iran is expected to press for cuts in production and higher prices.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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