

Outraged in Riyadh

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U.S.-Saudi relations are in crisis. King Abdullah thinks the Obama administration's love of universal freedoms is naive and inappropriate for conservative Gulf Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, when the big threat is Iran. Washington is upset about the king's alleged offer to bail out Egypt if Hosni Mubarak had decided to cling to power. And there's also the oil factor: With U.S. gasoline prices climbing and despite Riyadh's promises to make up for lost Libyan hydrocarbon sales, the Saudis "throttled back production in mid-March," according to the International Energy Agency.

So when Tom Donilon, the U.S. national security advisor, sat down with the aging Saudi monarch on April 12, there were indeed "a number of issues of common interest" to be reviewed at the meeting, as the Saudi Press Agency dryly reported. Having initially warmed to the newly elected U.S. president, Barack Obama -- who in return offered apparently obsequious deference -- King Abdullah feels let down by the White House on pretty well everything from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to Iran, and especially Iran.

The Donilon meeting was particularly interesting because of the reported presence of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the onetime Saudi ambassador to Washington and now the seldom-seen secretary-general of the Saudi National Security Council. For many years, especially when Prince Bandar was envoy to the United States, King Abdullah distrusted him: Too many of the snide stories that Prince Bandar told around town about the then crown prince got back to the kingdom. But Prince Bandar had, and perhaps still has, political and diplomatic talents that King Abdullah needs, especially now.

"Bandar Is Back" was the headline on an October 2010 piece I wrote for *Foreign Policy* about the prince's return home to Saudi Arabia; he had just resurfaced after mysteriously disappearing from the headlines for a couple of years. Although literally true, it was otherwise a little premature because the prodigal prince then disappeared from view again for several months. But in the last few weeks Prince Bandar indeed has been visibly back, on high-level missions to Pakistan, India, and China.

What it fully means is far from obvious, but there will be speculation about the future of Adel al-Jubeir, the current Saudi ambassador to Washington. Could there be a repeat of the first few weeks of Prince Turki al-Faisal's tenure as Saudi ambassador to the United States from 2005 to 2006, when King Abdullah let the White House know that his official envoy was no longer his chosen interlocutor with Washington?

Prince Turki's sin was not clear, but he had apparently written something to the king that incurred royal displeasure. Instead of dealing through Prince Turki, King Abdullah called back to the colors Prince Bandar, the previous ambassador, who went back and forth between Riyadh and Washington, repairing and nurturing the kingdom's most important foreign relationship, which was still troubled by suspicions of Saudi links to al Qaeda.

Prince Turki was left ambassador only in name. He sulked, not knowing whether Prince Bandar was even in town or not. To find out, he was often left to send an aide out to Dulles airport and Andrews Air Force Base to check to see whether Prince Bandar's aircraft was parked on the tarmac. Prince Turki eventually resigned and was replaced by Jubeir, a onetime aide to Prince Bandar whose English-language skills were much prized by King Abdullah. Since then Adel, as he is widely known, has schmoozed Washington but apparently ineffectively. "This White House just does not get it," one of his closest ambassadorial colleagues confided to me last month.

Adel was also at the Donilon meeting in Riyadh, performing his frequent task of acting as interpreter for the king, whether or not the meeting had anything to do with the United States. He had been also in the same chair the week before when U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates had passed through. There are smiles in the official photographs but no particular signs that the two sides are even on the same page.

King Abdullah cuts an increasingly pathetic figure. He underwent two operations on his back late last year in New York City and returned home from convalescence in Morocco earlier than his doctors recommended, I was told, because he was so worried by the revolutionary mood sweeping the Middle East. Although he can only manage two or three hours of official engagements each day, I am also told the burden of government is not easily shared. His notional successor, Crown Prince Sultan, is a vegetable, his appearance genial but his mind shot to shreds -- a WikiLeaks U.S. diplomatic cable said he was "for all intents and purposes incapacitated." The most likely next king is Interior Minister Prince Nayef, who runs the kingdom on a day-to-day basis but is currently vacationing abroad at an undisclosed destination, apparently sure of his power base within the House of Saud and the backing of the kingdom's religious conservatives.

Meanwhile, the king sees dangers all around him. He takes little pleasure in the demise of Egypt's Mubarak, a friend of Washington for 30 years who was cast aside in a mere 18 days. The man King Abdullah would like to see go to hell is Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi, who once tried to assassinate him -- but Obama will not oblige. In neighboring Bahrain, King Abdullah views the majority Shiites as being *untermenschen* at best, Iranian agents at worst. Now, the king sees Syrian President Bashar al-Assad under increasing threat. The Saudi leader has a soft spot for Syria: One of his previous wives (too many to count but never more than the Islamic four-at-a-time) was from Syria, and her sister married Rifaat al-Assad, Bashar's uncle. One of the offspring of this marriage, Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah, now his father's point man on Syria,

was also at the Donilon meeting.

As Donilon left Riyadh for the United Arab Emirates capital of Abu Dhabi and then home, King Abdullah went off to the camel races with Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa at the annual Janadriyah festival. It would have offered some relaxation to the turmoil and frustrations of current Middle East politics.

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