

# A Bedouin on a Camel?

## Saudi Foreign Policy and the Insurgency in Iraq

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### Brief Analysis

Iraq's interior minister, Bayan Jabr, lashed out at Saudi diplomacy while speaking to journalists in Amman on October 2. Referring to Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, Jabr said Iraq would not be lectured by "some Bedouin riding a camel." Broadening his remarks to the Saudi ruling family, the House of Saud, the Iraqi minister said, "There are regimes that are dictatorships; they have one god, he is the king, he is god of heaven and earth, and he rules as he likes. A whole country is named after a family."

The resulting furor has been partially smoothed over by the Iraqi foreign minister, Hoshiyar Zebari, who claimed Jabr was not speaking in an official capacity and had no jurisdiction over foreign affairs. But the incident marked the latest episode in a war of words among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq that had started two weeks earlier. Visiting the United States to attend the UN General Assembly in New York and meet the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington, Prince Saud had criticized American policy for deepening sectarian tensions in Iraq to the extent the country was effectively being handed over to Iran.

The sentiment underlying the harsh language used by all sides reflects widespread regional contempt for oil-rich Saudi Arabia, deep Arab suspicion of Iranian motives, and centuries-old antipathy between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. (Jabr, who belongs to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a Shiite party, also said, "There are four million Shiites [in Saudi Arabia] who are treated as third-class citizens.") What is remarkable is that the accusations have been made publicly and the diplomatic insults started with the comments of the Saudi foreign minister, usually the most suave and discreet of envoys.

### Souring Saudi-Iranian Relations?

In comments carried by the official Saudi Press Agency, Prince Saud was quoted expressing concern to journalists in Washington that Iran was interfering in Iraq, saying he had been told of "the entry of people, money, and weapons as well as meddling in political life." The comments drew a quick rebuke from Iran. A Foreign Ministry spokesman in Tehran said, "The Islamic Republic of Iran does not expect such remarks from its friends at such a sensitive time in the region, and considers them surprising and irrational." (On October 5, the Iranian foreign minister's scheduled

visit to Riyadh, part of a Persian Gulf tour, was cancelled. The same day, the crisis was also ratcheted up by a briefing in London by a senior British diplomat who accused the Iranian Revolutionary Guards of supplying roadside bombs to Shiite militants who have killed eight British soldiers so far this year in southern Iraq.)

The Saudi comments appear to mark the end of more than eight years of diplomatic truce between Riyadh and Tehran, established by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah when he was crown prince but already his country's effective leader due to King Fahd's poor health. In return for agreeing to go along with Saudi oil policy rather than clash with it, Iran won Riyadh's acquiescence not to press the investigation of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, in which nineteen American servicemen were killed. U.S. officials had to stand to one side even though Iranian intelligence agents were believed to have been involved.

Prince Saud is widely seen as King Abdullah's closest senior advisor and presumably would have been speaking with the king's authority. This means that less than two months after Abdullah succeeded King Fahd, there has been a major shift in Saudi policy. It will be interesting to see whether Washington and Riyadh can now cooperate more closely about the Iranian threat to regional security, including its nuclear program.

#### Saudi Efforts to Draw Iraq deeper into the Arab Fold

Apart from Iranian meddling, the Saudi leadership appears to be obsessed with the emergence of a Shiite dominated, pro-Iranian government in Iraq, which shares the largest stretch of Saudi Arabia's northern border. Given Iraq's fledgling democracy and the fact that its population is at least 60 percent Shiite, the emergence of such a government would not be surprising. But the House of Saud perhaps fears the effect on Saudi Shiites, who mainly live in the oil producing Eastern Province. In parallel to this tension, Saudi Sunnis are ultraconservative Wahhabists, the more doctrinal of whom consider Shiites to be apostates who deserve to be put to death.

The Saudi strategy appears to be to try to bring Iraq back into the (Sunni) Arab fold. On October 3, Prince Saud chaired a meeting in the Saudi port city of Jeddah of foreign ministers from Algiers, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and Syria; Arab League Secretary General Amr Mousa also attended. Prince Saud spoke of a "very dangerous" situation in Iraq in which a sectarian civil war was likely, and he demanded "a strong, practical, and fast position." Prince Saud hinted at more political participation for Iraq's minority Sunnis, saying no party should be left out of elections or the constitution. And he said that Iraqi Kurds' wish for federal autonomy should not be matched by Shiite autonomy in southern Iraq.

This initiative appears bound to have as little success -- none -- as a previous Saudi proposal that foreign forces in Iraq should be replaced by Arab military contingents. Saudi disquiet that Iraq no longer declares itself an "Arab state," a concession demanded by ethnic Kurds during the constitutional convention, would have been enhanced by Zebari's presence at the meeting -- the Iraqi foreign minister is himself a Kurd. Zebari took the opportunity to call on the Arab media, including the Saudi press, to stop describing the insurgents as "resistance fighters," saying the use of such terms amounts to incitement.

Saudi policy on Iraq has been a matter of concern in Washington, especially in light of the infiltration by Saudi fighters joining the insurgents and the financial support the insurgents receive from private circles in the kingdom. The U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad, was recently in Riyadh for talks with both King Abdullah and Crown Prince Sultan. On October 4, the Department of State's coordinator for Iraq, James Jeffrey, also met both men. Common ground might have been in short supply. The new Saudi ambassador to Washington, Prince Turki al-Faisal (Prince Saud's brother), once described the U.S.-led invasion as "a colonial war."

#### Prospects for U.S.-Saudi Relations

With Prince Saud increasingly ailing from Parkinson's disease, Prince Turki is likely to become a crucial player in the U.S.-Saudi dialogue on Iraq -- but not immediately. While Prince Turki presented his credentials to Secretary of

State Condoleezza Rice on September 13, he is not expected to take up his post until early November, after the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. A full agenda awaits him. Besides differences over Iraq and perhaps greater agreement about Iran, Washington and Riyadh share many issues of common concern, including global energy. And then there is President Bush's reform agenda; there are some signs Washington is pushing Saudi Arabia harder on political reform. Whereas previous U.S. reports on religious freedom included finger-wagging at longstanding, harsh Saudi discrimination against those Muslims not toeing the Wahhabist line, let alone non-Muslims, the late September report acknowledged that the deplorable state of religious persecution in the kingdom met the legal criteria for the United States to impose sanctions, which Rice waived for six months.

Simon Henderson, a London-based senior fellow of The Washington Institute and biographer of Saddam Hussein, specializes in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states.

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