

The September 11 Congressional Report:

A Sea Change in U.S.-Saudi Relations?

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Jul 30, 2003

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Brief Analysis

Yesterday's meeting in the White House between U.S. president George W. Bush and Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal reflects both Saudi official anger at the reports of the kingdom's apparent complicity in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and its continuing ability to gain short-notice access to the very top of the U.S. administration. But reports of the meeting suggest a new and public toughness by President Bush toward the Saudi leadership -- a significant break in the closeness between two political dynasties, the Bushes and the al-Saud.

Releasing the Twenty-Eight Pages

The Saudi delegation, which included its ambassador and longtime Bush family friend, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, wanted the U.S. government to release to the public the twenty-eight pages excised from last week's joint House-Senate investigation, reportedly detailing Saudi involvement in the September 11 attacks, so that the kingdom could respond publicly to the allegations. The Saudi request is laudable; it is good to see Riyadh wanting a full airing of the facts. This approach is also the best public-relations stance in the face of the allegations hinted at in the media and by those involved in the congressional investigation. The refusal of President Bush to publish any of the twenty-eight pages, announced ahead of the meeting, leaves the Saudis only with the residual hope that some public concern may be redirected toward the White House and away from the Saudis themselves. While some parts of public opinion might not be won over to the Saudi point of view, others might conclude that the kingdom is being treated unfairly.

At the heart of the twenty-eight pages is believed to be discussion of the links between fifteen of the nineteen hijackers who were Saudi citizens and their government (along with its agents). The pages probably also refer to the financial backing that senior Saudi princes are reported to have given Osama bin Laden from the mid-1990s -- funding that presumably contributed at least partially to al-Qaeda's choice of U.S. rather than Saudi targets.

The official U.S. reluctance to publish these pages could be explained by the need to protect what is known in intelligence jargon as "sources and methods." These pages almost certainly are based on intelligence gathered clandestinely. Revealing what information a government knows can indicate how the information is gained and therefore compromise ongoing operations. The United States will also be reluctant to reveal information given to it

by another foreign intelligence service, which could lead that foreign service to stop sharing as much information with the United States. In other words, as President Bush said yesterday, publishing the pages "would help the enemy," and it might reveal sources the United States does not want its Saudi friends to know about.

One particularly sensitive area could be signals intelligence, which over several years confirmed international bank transfers from accounts directly linked to Saudi princes, to other accounts similarly linked to Osama bin Laden. Financing from Saudis for terrorism remains an area of concern. There are reasons to worry that rich Saudi individuals continue to fund Islamic extremism in various parts of the world, including Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The Bush Administration Approach toward Saudi Arabia

Until yesterday, it was hard to escape the conclusion that George Bush prefers gestures of conciliation rather than confrontation when it comes to the Saudis. From their point of view, Saudi officials say that pushing the Bush administration has worked in the past. Consider three episodes. First, when Crown Prince Abdullah visited President Bush's ranch in Texas last year, the officials say Abdullah began by insisting that the United States must press Israel about the peace process; otherwise, it would be better that the summit be cut short. The president, they say, was immediately put on the defensive and urged Crown Prince Abdullah, the kingdom's de facto ruler due to the ill health of King Fahd, to remain for talks. Second, in advance of the war against Iraq, the kingdom reportedly pressed the United States not to release any oil from the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, assuring Washington that Saudi Arabia would arrange for OPEC members to produce any needed extra oil. The result was that, though the energy market has remained stable, prices, at around \$30 per barrel, are arguably much higher than they might be. (The high prices are an advantage to the kingdom and other oil exporters but act as a brake on the recovery of the global economy.) Third, Crown Prince Abdullah agreed to attend the Sharm al-Shaykh summit with Bush only if guaranteed that no invitation would be issued to the ruler of neighboring Qatar, Shaykh Hamad al-Thani, whom Abdullah reportedly loathes. Despite Qatar's help to the U.S. military -- crucially compensating for Saudi reluctance -- President Bush agreed.

Whatever was said during yesterday's discussion with the Saudi foreign minister in the Oval Office, President Bush's willingness to meet with the Saudi foreign minister went well beyond what was diplomatically required. Protocol demands only that Prince Saud be met by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who was also at the meeting. But this access was not surprising: Saudi ambassador Prince Bandar is also still said to be able to arrange meetings for himself -- as high up as the president -- with less than twenty-four hour's notice, despite the finding that some of his wife's Islamic charitable donations ended up in the hands of some of the September 11 hijackers.

The reported demand by the United States -- issued by National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice in a separate meeting -- that Saudi Arabia make available for interview Omar al-Bayoumi, a contact of two of the hijackers, is an additional indication of a tougher U.S. line. But it appears that U.S. agents will see al-Bayoumi only in the Saudi kingdom and, despite Prince Saud's agreement, such an interview will only be possible if the irascible Saudi interior minister, Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, acquiesces.

The ruling elite in Riyadh, where Crown Prince Abdullah's authority is regarded jealously by his rivals, Prince Nayef and Defense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, will now have to work out their reaction to President Bush's rejection of their request and seeming lack of concern about their embarrassment. Many in the United States, perhaps even his father, former President George H. W. Bush, will advise President Bush to back away from pressing the Saudis.

The Saudis have shown little reluctance to press Washington on issues important to Riyadh, such as their desire to see Israel make concessions. Yet, it is worth considering how the Saudis have in fact shown little, if any, willingness

to make compromises with Israel in the context of the peace process. Despite recent, fresh Israeli contacts at the foreign-minister level or above with Morocco, Qatar, and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia refuses to suggest any hint of normalization in advance of a full peace agreement endorsed by the Arab League -- an ambiguous and high hurdle. It was also discouraging to see that the statements at the Sharm al-Shaykh summit, attended by Bush and Abdullah, made no offer on behalf of Arab states to recognize Israel once a Palestinian state had been created. Given that President Bush met visiting Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon earlier in the day yesterday, it could be hoped that the president pressed the Saudis to redouble their reported support for the peace process.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute and the author of its 1994 policy paper, [After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia](#).

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