

Reforming the Arab Stand: A Saudi Initiative on Iraq and the Wider Arab World

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Brief Analysis

Last week, the Saudi government published what it described as a "Charter to Reform the Arab Stand," a document intended for endorsement at the next summit of Arab leaders, due to be held in Bahrain in March. Addressed to Arab kings and presidents, the charter calls for more internal reforms and "categorically reject[s] any illegal external aggression against any Arab state."

Policy toward Iraq

The proposal is viewed by many as part of the Saudi diplomatic effort to prevent the United States from going to war against Saddam Husayn. Indeed, Riyadh has sent several signals toward this end. Perhaps most interesting of all, some evidence suggests that the kingdom has been encouraging Saddam to consider exile. Despite Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal's denial of such rumors, a senior Saudi interior ministry official reportedly visited Baghdad several weeks ago in order to make just such a suggestion.

Moreover, in a long article in the January 12 London Sunday Times, another prominent Saudi proposed that Saddam be persuaded to step down via an offer of immunity from prosecution. Although the article's author, Hassan Yassin, was described simply as "a senior Saudi advisor," he is in fact closely associated with Prince Saud. Yassin also argued that Saddam could save face by telling the Iraqi people that he was relinquishing power only because his military advisors had concluded that sanctions had rendered the Iraqi armed forces incapable of withstanding an allied invasion. In another novel twist, Yassin suggested that instead of being given sanctuary in another country, Saddam and his immediate family could go into internal exile, under house arrest in one of his palaces, with the United Nations taking responsibility for their safety.

In addition, other reports have claimed that the Saudis are urging Iraq's military and security forces to overthrow Saddam, a tactic that would largely preserve the country's existing political structure. Riyadh fears that eliminating this structure would cause a collapse into anarchy and perhaps split Iraq into Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish statelets.

Saudi thinking on the future of Iraq is never expounded at length in public. The most accurate position is usually stated by Prince Saud, a confidant of Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler. Noted for his relatively brief but

carefully worded statements, Prince Saud has repeatedly said that the people of Iraq must choose their own leader, which suggests a freedom of choice that clearly does not exist in Iraq. Moreover, he has given clear signals that the kingdom dislikes the military option; during a December 2002 news conference, he asserted that "Arab states should be given a final chance to stop a war that will not only harm Iraq but also destabilize the Middle East." He went on to say that the kingdom would not participate directly in any military action.

In addition, Prince Saud was one of several foreign ministers from countries bordering Iraq who accepted an invitation to yesterday's meeting in Istanbul aimed at examining alternatives to war. Although the countries represented at the meeting -- Turkey, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia -- are probably too disparate a group to act in unison on any substantive issue, the meeting does reflect how the Iraq crisis is bringing Turks, Iranians, and Arabs together; of Iraq's neighbors, only Kuwait did not attend.

Nevertheless, despite the differences between Washington and much of the rest of the world, Saddam should take little solace from the Istanbul meeting or from Saudi public statements regarding his regime. For example, in his January 12 article, Yassin stated, "[F]ew can now doubt that President Bush has already won a war that has yet to be fought. . . . [Bush] may not have had immediate support from Middle East countries, who fear their powerful neighbor, but all of them accept that Saddam must be overthrown." Moreover, the various Saudi diplomatic moves regarding Iraq suggest a sense of disquiet with every option, including the status quo. Within the kingdom's leadership, one finds apparent policy differences on how to deal with Saddam as well as continued jockeying for power among the royal family's top rivals. Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz, a major player, met in Tunisia last week with his counterparts from other Arab countries, at one point presenting an award to Iraqi interior minister Mohammed Dhiab al-Ahmed, a key figure in Saddam's security structure. Meanwhile, other top members of the royal family have little to say about the gathering crisis: although the ailing King Fahd still makes public appearances for some official announcements and meetings with visiting dignitaries, he contributes little to the Iraq debate, and Crown Prince Abdullah's immediate deputy, Defense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, is reportedly vacationing in Morocco with no immediate plans to return home.

Reform at Home

The draft charter published by the Saudi government and currently being considered by a committee of senior Arab officials seems to reflect a sense of hopelessness felt across the Arab world, but particularly in the kingdom. In one especially mournful passage, Arab leaders are asked to acknowledge that joint Arab action requires "seriousness, credibility and commitment to implement adopted resolutions," noting that "all such requirements were lacking in the past."

Nevertheless, the charter does contain elements that are of great potential interest to U.S. policymakers. For one thing, it calls for self-reform and the promotion of political participation in Arab countries. It also proposes economic cooperation, a free trade zone, a unified customs union, and measures that would encourage private sector development. Many of these points might have to be taken up individually following the March summit, though; decisions made at such summits must be unanimous, so any lack of agreement on specific issues would kill the overall charter. Perhaps anticipating this problem, the charter states that those leaders who are unwilling to sign on to its proposals "cannot be considered to constitute part of the long-sought joint Arab action."

The charter's proposals regarding reform in Arab societies seem to reflect Crown Prince Abdullah's desire to advance Saudi society, albeit cautiously. As in the past, however, some of these measures will likely be resisted by the Sudairi princes (led by Sultan and Nayef), who fear that such moves might endanger their eventual succession to the throne.

Implications for the United States

Even if U.S. officials cannot contribute to the emerging but increasingly introspective debate on the future of the Arab world, they can take satisfaction at the Saudi charter's call for reform and urge the royal family to follow through on its proposals. As for Iraq, the difficulties in U.S.-Saudi relations since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have reduced Washington's expectations about the kingdom's willingness to aid in a U.S.-led campaign against Saddam. Saudi sensitivities must be considered, given that U.S. forces need base facilities and overflight rights for operations in Iraq. Nevertheless, U.S. officials should make sure that Riyadh clearly understands Washington's view on the crisis, namely, that UN members must enforce Security Council resolutions ordering Iraq to disclose and surrender its weapons of mass destruction.

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