

The Saudis and Saddam

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Articles & Testimony

Last week, the New York Times's Patrick E. Tyler reported that President Bush and Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had agreed on a new strategy of joint action and pressure to break the deadlock in the Middle East crisis. American officials would talk bluntly with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during his visit to Washington next week. Arab leaders would do the same when they meet with Yasser Arafat.

Warming to the theme, Times columnist Maureen Dowd concluded a column about the Crawford-Riyadh connection: "One thing is clear: By working more closely with the Saudi dynasty, this president may be getting closer to his dynasty's avenging dream of toppling Saddam."

Wrong. That is not part of Crown Prince Abdullah's agenda. In fact, it is the very opposite. Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler may want a cessation of violence in Palestine, but he also wants an American-led attack to overthrow Saddam Hussein to be postponed indefinitely.

Think about it, because not many people in Washington appear to be doing so. Does Crown Prince Abdullah want to see an end to Israeli tanks and Apache helicopters chasing around the West Bank and Gaza? Yes. Does he want normal relations with a state of Israel? No, he probably wakes up every morning hoping that it has disappeared.

In 2000, soon after Israel had withdrawn from Lebanon, the departing British ambassador in Saudi Arabia went to visit Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal for a farewell chat. How did the kingdom see Israel's withdrawal in the context of the (then still alive) peace process? he asked the foreign minister (who would also be present at the recent Crawford summit). "It is not important. As long as Israel is withdrawing, it doesn't matter if it takes 50 years [before it ceases to exist]," was the Saudi reply, according to a British intelligence official who read the account of the conversation sent back to London.

On Iraq, does Crown Prince Abdullah want Saddam Hussein's cruel, pariah regime replaced by a pro-Western government pumping oil in greater quantities than his own country? No. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't. Besides, any American offensive might go off half-cocked, resulting in a pro-Tehran regime in Baghdad (at least 60 percent of Iraqis are Shiite co-religionists of the Iranians).

On Palestine, will Crown Prince Abdullah and other Arab leaders be as tough on Arafat as President Bush will be on

Sharon? No. Why should they be? Sharon is the villain of the piece. Israel mounted an expansionist war of aggression in 1967 (not the war of reluctant self-defense depicted in Western history). What about terrorism and suicide bombers? Against occupation these are legitimate. Draping them in an Islamic banner even makes them noble.

But what about telling Arafat that he cannot constantly avoid tough decisions? That his backing for street confrontations and suicide bombers is in danger of being imitated by opposition forces in the wider Arab world? On past performance, Arafat will say, as he reportedly did to President Mubarak of Egypt last year, Why don't you condemn them publicly yourself first? Crown Prince Abdullah won't confront Arafat: It's not his style. Besides, his constituency does not want it. In a telethon the Saudi public has just collected over \$100 million for the Palestinian people, a great chunk of which is expected to go to Hamas, an organization that, ideologically, is dead set against ever recognizing the state of Israel.

And Arafat conniving with the Americans to clear the way for the overthrow of Saddam? Forget it. Arafat will use the opportunity to screw money out of Baghdad, and Saddam will think it is cheap at the price.

If President Bush bought the Saudis' theory of Middle East peace, one worries he might also have bought their view of September 11. Adel al-Jubeir, the crown prince's foreign policy adviser and spin doctor, said on "Meet the Press" on April 21: "Osama bin Laden wanted to give [the 9/11 operation] a Saudi face in order to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the United States." A pity al-Jubeir wasn't challenged on the proportion of Saudis among the detainees at Guantanamo Bay: nearly 80 percent, according to a Foreign Office source, who says the same pattern holds among the 16 named in mid-February by Attorney General John Ashcroft as posing an imminent threat to the United States or an American target in Yemen.

Did President Bush mention to Crown Prince Abdullah concerns in Washington that two senior Saudi princes had been paying off bin Laden since a 1995 bomb in Riyadh killed five American military advisers? The deal supposedly made back then was "no bombs in the kingdom, please." So bin Laden went after embassies in East Africa and the USS Cole instead. "When did X and Y stop paying off bin Laden?" I asked a British official last month. "Have they? We hope they have. But we don't know for certain," was the reply.

One hopes there is more to the emerging Bush Middle East policy than it seems. Maybe President Bush is merely reacting to pressure. Perhaps he should imitate Crown Prince Abdullah's relaxed style. The Saudi leader flew to Texas from his vacation home in Morocco. He had been there since the beginning of April, while the West Bank was erupting and an unprecedented number of unauthorized public demonstrations were unfolding in his kingdom, motivated as much by domestic grievances as by anti-Israeli and anti-American passions. From Texas, Crown Prince Abdullah flew back to Morocco, while many of his less regal brother Saudis headed home to face another broiling summer, short of air conditioning and desalinated water because of power outages.

One solution to those problems would be a massive investment in gas-fired power and desalination plants, as proposed by ExxonMobil and other U.S. and European oil companies. But deals are being delayed because of opposition by some senior Saudi princes and because Crown Prince Abdullah is distracted by Palestine. If President Bush can't even secure contracts for oil companies from the Saudis, how can he possibly secure Middle East peace? ❖

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