

The Saudis: Friend or Foe?

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Articles & Testimony

What kind of ally is Saudi Arabia? To Americans who watch with frustration as the Saudis prevaricate on the use of military bases there, the answer is clear: They aren't acting like allies at all. This frustration is turning to outrage as details emerge of Saudi unwillingness even to run "traces" on the men involved in the hijackings of Sept. 11. Experts in the region, however, suggest that America's problems have their roots in an intense struggle for succession in the House of Saud.

If this is so, what exactly is going on in the desert kingdom? Saudi watchers in the West are like Kremlinologists of old. They read bland stories from the official Saudi Press Agency to see who is mentioned and what is the order of names. And they monitor ages and health of the leading princes, some of whom are as overdue for retirement, if their system allowed it, as the sclerotic Soviet leadership was.

A Mysterious Departure

A few months ago, when 78-year-old Crown Prince Abdullah -- the de facto ruler because 80-year-old King Fahd is ailing -- was visiting Europe, the watchers raised an eyebrow when they saw his half-brother, Prince Nawwaf, a political nonentity, in the entourage. At the end of August, the jaws of those same watchers dropped when a brief official announcement said that Nawwaf had been appointed head of the General Intelligence Directorate, the equivalent of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The announcement said the previous head of Intelligence, Prince Turki al-Faisal, a son of the late King Faisal and therefore a nephew of Nawwaf, had resigned "at his own request." So much for a career of more than 30 years in intelligence, starting as deputy director at the age of 23, with promotion to the top job nine years later, in 1977. For a quarter-century, Turki had been the main contact point for liaison with the CIA, the British Secret Intelligence Service, and others. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, he had also held the "Afghanistan file," acting as the kingdom's main point of contact with the CIA-backed mujahedeen (i.e. with Osama bin Laden and others), then later with the various warring factions, and finally with the Taliban.

Washington has been at a loss to explain what caused Turki to resign. One theory was that his wife was ill, and that

he wanted more time for himself and his family. Another suggested that he had never completely recovered from an accident while camping in the desert in the mid-1980s, when he inhaled carbon monoxide from a defective heater. But these are just theories. He was sacked, and we don't know why, an indicator of how little is known about the closed Saudi society.

But Saudi watchers tend to be a diligent bunch. The involvement of Saudi-born terrorist bin Laden in the events of Sept. 11 made the resignation of Turki an issue that had to be resolved. The version now accepted as most likely is a baroque tale, combining dynastic tensions within the 30,000-strong royal family, Saudi relations with the Taliban, Saudi relations with the U.S., and the implication that the Saudis knew or suspected that bin Laden might carry out his hijacking outrages somewhere in the world in September.

The dramatis personae also include Prince Nayef, the interior minister. Aged 68, he is, like Fahd, Abdullah and Nawwaf, a son of King Abdul Aziz, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, who fathered a total of 44 sons before his death in 1953. (Since then, succession has passed from brother to brother.) Also central is Prince Sultan, the 77-year-old defense minister, and the likely king, however briefly, after Abdullah; he is a full brother of Fahd and Nayef. Prince Saud al-Faisal, the foreign minister and a brother of Turki (and son of the late King Faisal), is another key player, as is Prince Bandar, the Saudi ambassador in Washington. (The latter is Prince Sultan's son, and is said to have ambitions to be foreign minister.)

The succession struggle, particularly fraught since late 1995 -- when King Fahd had the first in a series of strokes -- has been played out against a background of internal political opposition, caused by poor government revenues from oil and resentment about princely corruption. There has also been long-standing tension between Turki and his uncle, Nayef, the interior minister, who was in charge of the domestic intelligence service. Theoretically, Turki answered to Nayef, but he had preserved a degree of independence.

The two men had a major falling out after the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers, attributed to minority Saudi Shiites with the backing of Iran. Turki had wanted full co-operation for the investigation with the FBI and the CIA; Nayef had refused, considering such co-operation an infringement of Saudi sovereignty. Turki's handling of the Afghanistan file was also judged faulty. Although the Taliban, like the Saudis, were Wahhabis, a puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam, their support for bin Laden had clearly begun to harm the kingdom's best interests. The regime had made a strategic mistake in backing the Taliban -- their fellow Wahhabis -- but now Turki was going to be the fall guy.

Nayef took the issue of his differences with Turki to Crown Prince Abdullah, the kingdom's de facto ruler, who could not ignore the complaint. Along with Fahd, Abdullah and Sultan, Nayef is one of the four most powerful men in Saudi Arabia. Abdullah proposed a compromise: Turki, he agreed, would go, but would be replaced by Abdullah's confidante and constant companion, Prince Nawwaf.

The timing of Turki's removal -- Aug. 31 -- and his Taliban connection raise the question: Did the Saudi regime know that bin Laden was planning his attack against the U.S.? The current view among Saudi-watchers is probably not, but that the House of Saud might have heard rumors that something was planned, although they did not know what or when. (An interesting and possibly significant detail: Prince Sultan, the defense minister, had been due to visit Japan in early September, but canceled his trip for no apparent reason less than two days before his planned departure.)

For Western diplomats and intelligence officers trying to achieve international co-operation in the hunt for bin Laden, Turki's forced departure seems like a cruel farce. The close personal relations they had developed over the years with a key player in Saudi Arabia are now worthless. U.S. officials find themselves dealing with Nayef, who doesn't want to co-operate, and Nawwaf, the new intelligence chief, who is quite out of his depth. And it doesn't help that Crown Prince Abdullah is in a huff over President Bush's determination to wage war in Afghanistan.

Sensitive

Why are the Saudis so sensitive on co-operating with the U.S., either in investigating the activities of bin Laden or assisting the strikes on Afghanistan? It seems that, despite the years of U.S. help for the development of Saudi Arabia's oil reserves and the building of its well-equipped armed forces, many Saudis, including sections of the royal family, resent the debt they owe Washington. It is a resentment that could not be worked through while Saddam Hussein continued to threaten the kingdom from the north, and now the feeling is deepened by embarrassment regarding the Saudi-born bin Laden.

For Washington, this represents an enormous conundrum with no quick fix. Most Saudi watchers don't think the kingdom is about to crumble -- the House of Saud will be ruthless in preserving itself. Relations are going to be tough, and unless the U.S. can show resolution and success, they can only get tougher. ❖

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