

Confusing Signals out of Saudi Arabia

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On Friday in Europe, Secretary of State Colin Powell is set to meet Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia. Washington's relationship with the world's largest oil exporter has become strained for reasons more complicated than Crown Prince Abdullah's recent reluctance to meet President Bush at the White House, allegedly because of perceived U.S. bias toward Israel and against the Palestinians. Saudi diplomacy suffers a credibility problem because contradictory statements by top Saudi officials often leave diplomats guessing as to what is the real Saudi position.

Royal Family Politics

In determining Saudi policy, Crown Prince Abdullah defers to King Fahd, the monarch who has been ailing since the first of several strokes in late 1995 (the 80-year-old king no longer handles day-to-day administration, although he still involves himself in the most important affairs of state). Full brothers, Defense Minister Prince Sultan (77) and Interior Minister Prince Nayef (68) are rivals to the Saudi throne of their half-brother Abdullah (78).

In recent weeks, Sultan and Nayef have spoken out on matters that might have been considered within Crown Prince Abdullah's purview, and in so doing have possibly undermined Abdullah's room to maneuver: On June 7, Prince Nayef again promised but has yet to deliver details on the perpetrators of the 1996 al-Khobar bombing and on an earlier incident in Riyadh in which five other Americans were killed. On June 18, Prince Sultan called for the re-establishment of the Arab boycott of commercial companies doing business with Israel.

Even non-royal ministers, who form a second ruling tier, have been contributing policy statements that would appear to challenge Abdullah's authority. Oil Minister Ali al-Naimi has spent months trying to diminish the role of foreign oil companies in the exploitation of Saudi gas reserves for which outline agreements were finally signed on June 3. Despite Exxon/Mobil being given the leading role in two of three projects, the European companies BP, Shell, and TotalFinaElf ended up with a surprisingly large 44 percent of the deals. Saudi officials privately suggest that Naimi's comments reflected concern in the royal family, perhaps even by King Fahd, that the gas initiative policy being pushed by Abdullah was not in the best interests of the kingdom. Crown Prince Abdullah's Foreign Policy

As if to mount a counter-propaganda campaign, Crown Prince Abdullah has given not just one but two rare interviews to foreign media outlets in the last three weeks. To mark his arrival in Germany on an official visit, he

spoke to the magazine Der Spiegel; this week, resting at his vacation home in Morocco, he answered questions posed by the London Financial Times.

Abdullah made surprisingly moderate statements in these interviews. In Der Spiegel, for example, he stated, "For more than fifty years, no Arab had thought that it was possible to live together with Israel. Today we have arrived at the point where Arabs and Israelis can begin a new life together. We have a real chance for peace." Saudi rulers have rarely, if ever, suggested that the kingdom could form relations with Israel; but it is particularly unusual to hear such a sentiment at a time when many in the Arab world are spewing venomous statements toward Israel with regularity.

On the other hand, the interviews made clear that Abdullah has both tremendous sympathy with the fate of Palestinians and a core belief that Jerusalem is an Islamic and Arab entity -- although, like other Arab leaders, he is understood to personally loathe the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat. Still, Abdullah appears to be bereft of any strategies that might break the logjam other than suggesting that the United States should pressure Israel "to stop its expansionist and oppressive policies." The front page story in the Financial Times about its own interview with Abdullah was entitled, "Saudi Crown Prince calls for international force to monitor Palestinian-Israeli truce," but the official Saudi Press Agency report of the interview failed to mention any discussion of such a force.

Abdullah has also expressed concern about how Israeli-Palestinian violence could spill over to threaten the Saudi kingdom, warning about the prospect of "terrorism out of the region [which] would engulf the world." In fact, Saudi Arabia appears to fear that success by Hamas terror cells would lead to copycat terrorism by opponents of the regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia itself. Western officials suggest that the recent series of bombings inside the kingdom in which one British expatriate was killed and several -- including an American physician -- were injured, represent the work of Islamic opponents of the Saudi royal family. Although Saudi officials consistently claim that the bombs represent gang warfare by rival groups of bootleggers, Western diplomats report that Islamists have deliberately chosen as targets customers leaving illegal bars in order to heighten the embarrassment of the Saudi regime.

Upcoming Issues on the U.S.-Saudi Agenda

Even if the meeting of Crown Prince Abdullah with General Powell is dominated by issues surrounding Israeli-Palestinian relations, Washington should also be concerned by the Saudi stance at next week's OPEC ministerial meeting. No production increase is expected to relieve the recent high prices despite the peak demand of the summer driving season. At the same time, there is no prospect of using oil as a weapon to place political pressure on the West, as Abdullah explained in his Financial Times interview.

And, although Abdullah blames Saddam Hussein for the suffering of the Iraqi people, doubts persist about Saudi willingness to provide facilities for U.S. Air Force units patrolling over southern Iraq -- a gap that neighboring Qatar is anxious to fill.

One delicate issue has been the case of around twenty foreigners, including one American, reportedly being held in the cells of Prince Nayef's Ministry of Interior in Riyadh. A Canadian, a Belgian, and a British citizen have confessed -- by some suggestions, after long periods of sleep deprivation -- to planting bombs that diplomats blame on Saudi Islamists. Prince Nayef will not carry out any sentence for flogging or execution without clearance from both Crown Prince Abdullah and King Fahd -- permission that is unlikely to be given in this case. However, Prince Nayef will not release the foreign nationals until a face-saving formula is devised. This will take time, and Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, a nephew of the main players, is unlikely to be given a key role.

Saudi sensitivity to public disagreements may mean that General Powell will have to choose his words with particular care this week. Saudi Arabia will remain a very important partner for the United States in the fields of military, energy, and diplomatic cooperation, but for the immediate future, the kingdom looks like it may be shirking

a major role in regional policy.

Simon Henderson, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is author of its forthcoming Policy Paper [The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy](#), to be published later this year.

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