

Power struggle in Saudi Arabia: a sign of regional instability

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The abrupt resignation of Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the US, Prince Turki al-Faisal, last week is one more sign of a power struggle underway in Riyadh. While factional intrigues in the Saudi royal family are undoubtedly involved, the overriding factor is the deepening instability throughout the Middle East being fuelled by the aggressive intervention of the US, above all in Iraq. One consequence has been an intensification of the traditional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional dominance.

After just 17 months as US ambassador, Prince Turki announced on December 12 that he was quitting to spend more time with his family. The reason is obviously absurd. He gave the same excuse when in 2002 he stood aside as head of the Saudi intelligence services—a post he held for 24 years and which included responsibility for providing covert funding in the 1980s to the Afghan mujahedeen via Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

Prince Turki has the highest connections in the ruling royal family. He is a nephew of King Abdullah and brother of Prince Saud al-Faisal, the country's long-serving foreign minister. According to an article entitled "A Saudi Power Struggle?" by the US-based think tank Stratfor, Prince Turki returned home to shore up the interests of the al-Faisal faction and to claim the post of foreign minister in the event of his ailing brother's death.

Prince Turki, however, appears to face opposition. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the previous Saudi ambassador in Washington, who returned to Riyadh to head the newly created and powerful National Security Council, also seems to have an eye on the key position. All these manoeuvres involve factional calculations as the various royal clans vie for domination.

The byzantine inner workings of Saudi politics are far from clear. The royal despots who rule the country feel no obligation to explain their actions. What is plain, however, is that the current eruption of tensions in Riyadh is being fuelled by deep concerns among the Saudi ruling elite about the future direction of US policy in the Middle East, the disaster unfolding across the border in Iraq and the potential for rival Iran to fill the political vacuum created by the US invasion and removal of the Saddam Hussein regime.

The discussion is couched in overtly sectarian terms. The Sunni establishment in Saudi Arabia is alarmed at what it claims is the growing influence of Shiite Iran, the emergence of a Shiite-dominated government and Shiite militia in Iraq and the growth of a "Shiite crescent" stretching from Iran through Syria to Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon. At home, it faces an increasingly restive

Shiite minority.

The divisions in Saudi Arabia have been intensified by the debate in Washington over the Iraq Study Group report, which among its recommendations proposed that the Bush administration engage in direct talks with Iran and Syria. Deeply concerned that any deal with Tehran would be at their expense, sections of the Saudi ruling elite have sought reassurances from Washington and warned that Riyadh may be compelled to support Sunni insurgents inside Iraq as a means of countering Iranian influence.

In the lead-up to the report's release this month, US Vice President Dick Cheney made a special trip to Saudi Arabia on November 25 to meet for a few hours with King Abdullah. Cheney epitomises the close links of the Bush administration with the Saudi monarchy and shares its hostility to any deal with Iran. Media reports, later officially denied, indicated that Abdullah insisted that the US had to rein in Shiite militia in Iraq and threatened to actively back Sunni insurgents if the US began a pull out from Iraq.

Prince Turki and his brother have taken a more cautious approach in contrast to King Abdullah and Prince Bandar. According to an article "Princes at odds" in the British-based *Economist*, Prince Bandar, as security adviser, "is said to have advocated a more aggressive foreign policy for the kingdom, in a break from the quiet chequebook diplomacy long pursued by the Faisal brothers. He is also said to have pursued initiatives independent of the now-ailing foreign minister, including a recent unannounced visit to Washington where he is said to have encouraged Bush administration hawks to resist mounting calls to engage with Iran and Syria. Prince Turki, for his part, has called America's refusal to talk to Iran a mistake."

The sharp differences were highlighted in a comment by US-based Saudi security adviser Nawaf Obaid in the *Washington Post* on November 29. Obaid openly warned that one of the first consequences of any US withdrawal from Iraq would be "massive Saudi intervention to stop Iranian-backed Shiite militias from butchering Iraqi Sunnis". He pointed to a "chorus of voices"—in Saudi Arabia, from Sunni tribal and religious leaders in Iraq, and the leaders of Egypt, Jordan and other Arab and Muslim countries—calling for Saudi Arabia to "provide Iraqi Sunnis with weapons and financial support".

To avoid a rupture in relations with Washington, the Saudi regime, officially at least, has held back from backing the Sunni insurgents in Iraq who are attacking American troops. But with

discussion in the US of withdrawal, “the Saudi leadership is preparing to substantially revise its Iraq policy. Options now include providing Sunni military leaders with the same types of assistance—funding, arms and logistical support—that Iran has been giving Shiite armed groups for years.”

Obaid also suggested that King Abdullah “may decide to strangle Iranian funding of the militias through oil policy. If Saudi Arabia boosted production and cut the price of oil in half, the kingdom could still finance its current spending. But it would be devastating to Iran, which is facing economic difficulties even with today’s high prices. The result would be to limit Tehran’s ability to continue funnelling hundreds of millions each year to Shiite militias in Iraq and elsewhere.”

He concluded that Saudi Arabia could not sit on the sidelines of a burgeoning civil war in Iraq that threatened to establish an Iranian-influenced, Shiite-dominated state. “To turn a blind eye to the massacre of Iraqi Sunnis would be to abandon the principles upon which the kingdom was founded. It would undermine Saudi Arabia’s credibility in the Sunni world and would be a capitulation to Iran’s militarist actions in the region. To be sure, Saudi engagement in Iraq carries great risks—it could spark a regional war. So be it. The consequences of inaction are far worse.”

Obaid’s comments were quickly repudiated in Saudi Arabia and he was sacked as a consultant by Prince Turki, but there is no doubt that his remarks reflect sentiments in Saudi ruling circles. While Obaid’s warnings are obviously aimed at pushing the Bush administration to maintain the US military occupation of Iraq, they point to the profoundly destabilising consequences of the US invasion. By ousting Saddam Hussein and installing a puppet government resting on the Shiite and Kurdish elites, Washington is directly responsible for fuelling the escalating sectarian war in Iraq, which contains the seeds of a far broader conflict.

Washington’s alliance with the autocratic Saudi monarchy has been a cornerstone of US policy in the Middle East for decades. Saudi Arabia was a key ally in the CIA’s covert war in Afghanistan in the 1980s against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, viewing it as an opportunity to assert its claims to be a defender of Islam. Its subsequent support for the US-led Gulf War in 1990-91 and the stationing of US troops in Saudi Arabia produced sharp disaffection in Saudi ruling circles, typified by the bitter opposition of Osama bin Laden. The present regime in Riyadh is acutely aware that if it fails to back Sunni militia in Iraq, it risks the eruption of opposition at home from dissident sections of the ruling elite.

The Iraq Study Group noted that there is already evidence of private Saudi support for Sunni insurgents in Iraq. A recent Associated Press article interviewed several truck drivers in Middle East capitals who claimed that Saudis had been using religious events, like the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, as the cover for illicit money transfers to Iraqi Sunnis. “They sent boxes full of dollars and asked me to deliver them to certain addresses in Iraq. I know it is being sent to the resistance, and if I don’t take it with me, they will kill me,” one driver said.

Saudi officials insist they are seeking to prevent money and arms flowing to Iraqi insurgents. The Bush administration, which

routinely accuses Iran of supporting Shiite militias, has been silent on the issue, not wishing to offend a key US ally. But a report by the Saudi National Security Assessment Project (NSAP), which was headed by Obaid, suggests that, at the very least, advanced preparations have been made to intervene in the Iraqi civil war.

Details of the NSAP report, produced in March, surfaced this week in the right-wing *Washington Times*, which highlighted the claim that Iran had created a Shiite “state within a state” in Iraq. It also contained detailed estimates of the strengths of the Sunni and Shiite militias and concluded that “Saudi Arabia has a special responsibility to ensure the continued welfare and security of Sunnis in Iraq”. The newspaper noted that Saudi intelligence was already working with elements of Hussein’s old intelligence network, the notorious Mukhabarat, to counter what it saw as the Iranian threat.

The sharpening rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is only intensifying the irresolvable contradictions confronting the Bush administration in Iraq. The US occupation rests on a Shiite-dominated puppet government with ties to Shiite Iran, but Washington wants to oust, rather than negotiate with, the Tehran regime. Washington is seeking the support of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan to push “moderate Sunni Iraqis” to reach an accommodation with the US occupation in preparation for a bloody crackdown on Shiite militias and Sunni insurgents. Such a move, however, threatens not only to destabilise the present Baghdad regime, but to escalate the war in Iraq and draw neighbouring countries into the sectarian conflict.

The Bush administration invaded Iraq in order to seize the country’s massive oil reserves and establish a base of operations for its broader project of asserting US domination of the Middle East against its European and Asian rivals. In doing so, the US has not only created a quagmire in Iraq, but has set off far-reaching political tremors throughout the region, including in long-time ally Saudi Arabia.

Last weekend’s *Sunday Times* likened the situation to Europe’s bloody seventeenth century conflict between Catholics and Protestants—the Thirty Years’ War—and warned of a similar protracted sectarian war between Shiites and Sunnis in the Middle East. “The war is already under way, and the feckless American president has little chance to arrest or even guide it. We do not know how profound the destruction might get and how far the forces of chaos could spread. One thing we know: oil prices could experience extreme instability. The world economy could be battered,” the article concluded.

The London-based newspaper stopped short of making the obvious point. In such a conflict, with such vital interests at stake, it would be impossible for all the world’s major powers not to be drawn in.



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