

Saudi officials vent anger over US failure to attack Syria

By Peter Symonds
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In comments to European diplomats last weekend, Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan confirmed that his country's decision last Friday not to accept a temporary seat on the UN Security Council was "a message for the US, not the UN."

Having collaborated closely in the US-led war for regime change in Syria, Saudi Arabia reacted angrily to the Obama administration's decision to pull back from an imminent missile and air attack on Syria last month. It also has concerns over Washington's involvement in international talks with Iran, which Riyadh regards as its chief rival in the region.

"A source close to Saudi policy" told Reuters: "Prince Bandar told [European] diplomats that he plans to limit interaction with the US. This happens after the US failed to take any effective action on Syria and Palestine. Relations with the US have been deteriorating for a while, as Saudi feels that the US is growing closer to Iran."

To date, the Saudi regime has collaborated closely with Washington in arming, training and financing Syrian militias fighting to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The *Wall Street Journal* reported: "Prince Bandar told them [the diplomats] he intends to roll back the partnership with the US in which the CIA and other nations' security forces have covertly helped to train Syrian rebels to fight Mr Assad." Saudi Arabia would instead work with other allies, including Jordan and France.

The Reuters source explained: "The shift away from the US is a major one. Saudi doesn't want to find itself any longer in a situation where it is dependent." He also warned that there would be wide-ranging consequences, including on purchases of US arms and on oil sales.

The longstanding US-Saudi alliance has rested on the

assumption that Saudi Arabia would supply oil and purchase American arms in return for a US guarantee of security for the autocratic Saudi monarchy. The Reuters article suggested that Riyadh might also scale back its purchase of US bonds and other dollar-denominated assets. "All options are on the table now, and for sure there will be some impact," the source said.

A *Wall Street Journal* article pointed to another recent source of Saudi bitterness. When asked by Riyadh for details of US plans to defend Saudi oil production during a US attack on Syria, "Americans told them US ships wouldn't be able to fully protect the oil region." Dissatisfied with the response, "the Saudis told the US that they were open to alternatives to their longstanding defence partnership, emphasising that they would look for good weapons at good prices, whatever the source."

Saudi anger over the US decision to postpone its attack on Syria was confirmed in a speech by former intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal in Washington on Tuesday. Speaking to the National Council on US-Arab Relations, he ridiculed a US-Russian deal to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons as "lamentable" and a "charade" designed "not only to give Mr Obama an opportunity to back down [from military strikes], but also help Assad to butcher his people."

In an interview with *Al Monitor*, Prince Turki said there was "a high level of disappointment in the US government's dealings, not just with Palestine, but equally with Syria." He was also dismissive of US talks with the new Iranian government, saying: "It is up to the Iranians to show that their sweet and sensible talk is going to be translated into action."

The Saudi regime has been fearful of the consequences for its own rule of the revolutionary

eruptions that emerged in 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt. Among its grievances against Washington have been the token US criticisms of its brutal suppression of anti-government protests in Bahrain in 2011 and its failure to prop up Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak. When the Egyptian military ousted the Muslim Brotherhood-led government in July, Saudi Arabia, along with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, promised billions of dollars in aid to the military regime.

The Saudi autocracy, which rests ideologically on the promotion of reactionary Sunni extremism, has fanned sectarian hatreds throughout the region against the influence of Iran's Shiite clerical regime. Riyadh seized on the US intervention in Syria both as a means for suppressing the emergence of another revolutionary movement and for ousting the Assad regime, which is a key ally of Tehran and is based on the Shiite Alawite sect.

Saudi intelligence has actively supported the right-wing Islamist militias fighting Assad, and may have been involved in staging the August 21 chemical weapon attack near Damascus that provided the US with a pretext for attacking Syria. Now Washington has not only backed away from immediate military strikes, but is in talks with Riyadh's arch-rival, Tehran.

US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal in Paris on Monday, but the tensions remain. The threat by Saudi intelligence chief Bandar to look elsewhere for arms, oil markets and investment opportunities is an indication of the far-reaching geo-political ramifications of any, even temporary, rapprochement between the US and Iran.

Saudi Arabia is not the only US ally in the region to have registered its displeasure with the Obama administration's decision to delay an attack on Syria. Turkey has also been intimately involved in US-backed efforts to oust the Assad regime. It hosts a CIA base that coordinates the flow of arms, supplies and Sunni Islamist fighters into northern Syria from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

In early October, Turkey, which is a NATO ally, shocked Washington by announcing that it would purchase a sophisticated FD-2000 air defence missile system from China. To add to the insult, the arms are to be supplied by the China Precision Machinery Import

and Export Corp, which is under US sanctions over its dealings with Iran, North Korea and Syria.

Washington has expressed "serious concern" about the deal, saying that Chinese-made missile system "will not be interoperable with NATO systems." Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan brushed aside the criticism, however. He declared on Wednesday that, while a final decision is yet to be made, "nobody has the right to overshadow our understanding of [our] independence."

Like Saudi Arabia, Turkey had been pinning its hopes on a massive US attack on Syria as the means for reversing the military defeats suffered by Al Qaeda-linked opposition militias, and ousting the Assad regime. Turkey remains a key NATO ally, but its decision to buy Chinese arms sends a message to Washington that its support cannot be taken for granted.

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