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US-Saudi Relations: On the Verge of a Crisis?

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On December 17, 2013, Mohammed bin Nawaf, the Saudi ambassador to Great Britain, published an exceptionally harsh op-ed in the *New York Times* about the policy of the Obama administration toward Iran and Syria. Until recently, signs of Saudi dissatisfaction with the administration's Middle East policy came primarily from reports and news analyses. Of late, however, the Saudi government has become much less cautious about its public criticism of the United States.

Two days before the bin Nawaf article, the *New York Times* quoted Prince Turki al-Faisal – former Saudi ambassador to the United States and former head of Saudi intelligence – who has a senior unofficial status in the Saudi government, on the collapse of the red lines set by President Obama last year. According to al-Faisal, when the leader of the United States gives an assurance concerning red lines, the kingdom expects him “to stand by it,” particularly as “there is an issue of confidence.” The failure of the international community to stop the war in Syria is “almost a criminal negligence.” The prince referred explicitly to the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, noting that “if the president retreats from his position on compromise along the 1967 borders, as he did on his red line on use of chemical weapons by Assad, then the whole enterprise of peace between the Arabs and Israel will evaporate.”

In his op-ed, bin Nawaf asserts that Saudi Arabia believes that Western policy toward Iran and Syria endangers the stability and security of the Middle East. He notes that “this is a dangerous gamble,” and therefore his country “cannot remain silent, and will not stand idly by.” According to the ambassador, the crisis in Syria continues, with more than 100,000 civilians killed thus far. Even though the international community has made efforts to deprive the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad of weapons of mass destruction, the West must understand that the regime itself is the greatest source of mass murder: chemical weapons are only a small part of the Assad regime's killing machine, and while Assad appears to be cooperating with international initiatives to bring the crisis to an end, the regime will in fact continue to work to the best of its ability to prevent a serious solution to the crisis.

The Assad regime, according to the ambassador, has been reinforced by Iranian troops in Syria. These troops have not entered the country in order to protect it from a hostile outside enemy, but are there in order to support an evil regime that is hurting the Syrian people. This is a typical pattern for Iran, which is supporting and training subversive elements in Iraq, Lebanon (Hizbollah), Yemen, and Bahrain. Nevertheless, Western states have chosen not to take the necessary steps against these countries. The West allows one regime (Syria) to continue to exist and the second (Iran) to continue its uranium enrichment program, with all the dangers this entails. The decisions made in Western capitals in this context endanger stability in the region, and potentially the security of the entire Arab world.

This, states the ambassador, leaves Saudi Arabia, more determined than ever to ensure the stability that the Middle East so desperately needs, no choice but to conduct a more assertive foreign policy in international affairs. Saudi Arabia has enormous responsibility in the region as the cradle of Islam and one of the most important states in the Arab world. The kingdom, as a major player in the global energy market, also has major economic and political responsibility. In addition, Saudi Arabia has humanitarian responsibility to do everything possible to bring about an end to the suffering in Syria.

The ambassador notes that Saudi Arabia showed willingness to act independently when it decided to reject a seat in the UN Security Council. Using sharp language, he criticized the UN's ineffectiveness, particularly in Syria. What is the point, he asks, in joining an "international talking shop" when so many lives are threatened and when so many opportunities for a settlement have failed because of the UN's inability to act? He makes it clear that Saudi Arabia will continue to demonstrate its determination by supporting the Free Syrian Army and Syrian opposition elements.

The op-ed does not mention President Obama, but it is clear that the criticism is directed mainly at him. The wording is rather blunt, at times even threatening. Publication of the article almost certainly indicates that Saudi Arabia realizes it will not succeed in bringing about a change in the Obama administration's positions on Iran and Syria through the discrete action it has used until now. At the same time, the kingdom does not wish to bring about a major rupture with the Obama administration. While the article was written by a relatively low-level official, it clearly represents the positions of the regime. There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia seeks to signal its serious distress vis-à-vis the West, but it does not actually wish to disengage from it – nor does it have a real ability to do so.

Israel is not mentioned in the article, which makes reference to the Saudi peace initiative as an example of the kingdom's ability to pursue a bold, independent course of action and underlines that from the Saudi point of view, no option has been taken off the table. Was the ambassador hinting that there might be a change in the traditional Saudi position on the peace process and relations with Israel? He gave no details.

In context of the rift in Saudi-US relations, Saudi Arabia's intention is to send a clear message, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, to the West in general, and the United States in particular. Saudi Arabia is very disappointed with the Obama administration's conduct toward Syria and Iran. This conduct has created a crisis of confidence between the two countries, which until now were considered close allies, and the credibility of the US president is at stake. While Saudi Arabia has no interest in sparking a full-blown crisis in relations, it feels forced to issue an open, biting warning, after its efforts to bring about a change in US policy through less public channels were unsuccessful. The message conveyed is that Saudi Arabia has a central role in the Arab world, the Islamic world, and the international system, and the United States would do well not to test the kingdom's determination to pursue an independent policy that is not necessarily compatible with US interests at this time.

The current head of Saudi intelligence has joined the fray, and in response to recent developments, was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying that "the kingdom was now seeking other strategic allies." To be sure, the dispute between the two is not only over US policy in the context of the turmoil in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia fears a strategic change of direction by the United States, which has already announced that in the future, East Asia will be its highest priority. Furthermore, in recent years the United States has stepped up the pace of oil and gas production, and according to forecasts, will become an oil exporter by the end of the decade. The Saudis fear that if and when the United States achieves complete energy independence, it will not need Riyadh any longer and will considerably reduce involvement in the Middle East.

