

The Saudi Royals – Unchained

Exclusive: With President Obama afraid of upsetting the Saudis anymore after the Iran-nuclear deal, he has given them pretty much a free hand to bomb and blockade Yemen. Meanwhile, the Saudi royals are displaying their contempt for the United Nations and its Yemen peace efforts, Joe Lauria reports.

By Joe Lauria

Saudi Arabia's relations with the United Nations have hit rock bottom after a series of incidents that has left a humbled Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon furious with Riyadh, two U.N. officials close to the U.N. chief have told me.

The relationship matters because only the United Nations has the reputation of neutrality necessary to forge a power-sharing deal that can finally end the conflict in Yemen.

Ban was cool to the Saudi-led operation from the start. On the first day of bombing on March 26 he called on countries to "refrain from external interference" which seeks to "foment conflict and instability." Since then the Saudis have shown near total disregard for Ban and the U.N.'s role in the conflict.

–Ban was upset that the Saudis' military operation in Yemen derailed U.N.-brokered talks in March.

–He believes he was lied to by the Saudis when they didn't deliver on a promise of aid money to the U.N.

–The Saudis have blockaded ports bringing the U.N. to the verge of declaring a famine in Yemen.

–Ban was apoplectic that Riyadh forced a postponement in June of U.N.-led talks in Geneva; and then later broke two promises to Ban of a humanitarian truce.

–The U.N. made matters worse by ignoring Saudi conditions and declaring an unconditional truce in early July anyway, which never took hold.

–The Saudis unilaterally announced a humanitarian pause at the end of July bypassing the U.N., which also quickly fell apart.

–The Saudi offensive in August aimed at advancing on the capital of Sana'a has pushed a UN-brokered negotiated settlement even further off the table.

Saudi Impunity

Saudi leaders seem confident there are no consequences for repeatedly slighting Ban: he'll just take it and not say a word publicly. Ban believes in "quiet diplomacy." He's not known for convincing displays of emotion. His attempts at outrage over atrocities and injustices fall flat.

He told me once in an interview he screams at his staff, as if to show he's no pushover. But that's taking it out on his inferiors. Unlike Dag Hammarskjöld, who took on both Cold War powers (and may have cost him his life), and Kofi Annan, who dared criticize Washington over Iraq, Ban mostly remains mute in the face of superior power.

Behind the scenes is a different matter. Ban is palpably "angry" with the Saudis, as one UN official, who's met with him recently, put it, and "frustrated," said another official close to Ban.

On the first day of the Saudi aerial assault, Ban declared: "Despite escalation, negotiations remain the only option." He was echoing his then envoy Jamal Benomar, who maintains that the destruction and death will end only with a U.N.-brokered deal that includes the Houthis. Right now the Saudis are making a mockery of that notion, and Ban's taking it hard.

Benomar had worked with the Yemeni parties for four years. He told me they were close to a power-sharing deal when the start of Saudi bombing ended the talks. The outstanding issue was the power of the presidency. The Saudis wouldn't pressure Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi to take a reduced role, which Benomar says the Houthis would have accepted. They were ready to pull their militia out of Sana'a, to be replaced by a national unity force the U.N. had prepared for deployment, he says.

Ban's New Envoy

Saudi-owned media called Benomar the "Houthi envoy" because the deal he was brokering would've given 20 percent of cabinet and parliament seats to the Houthis even though they had taken over the capital and at the time were headed towards Aden.

Benomar quit on April 16 and Mauritanian diplomat Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed took over. "The Secretary-General was not happy that he had to pull Cheikh Ahmed out of his position of head of the emergency ebola response," a U.N. official told me.

Two days after Benomar resigned, the Saudis responded to a U.N. appeal for humanitarian aid, pledging \$274 million. It's been suggested this was a quid-pro-quo to dump Benomar for Cheikh Ahmed. That's been denied by U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq.

But Ban understood the Saudi money would go directly to the U.N.'s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA). He became apoplectic when he learned the Saudis are instead keeping it in the King Salman Foundation, a U.N. official told me.

"We want to make sure that aid goes to all people in need," another U.N. official said, fearing the Saudis will only distribute it to pro-government areas. Talks are continuing with the Saudis to convince them to let the U.N. control the money, he said, as well as to open ports to humanitarian aid, but so far to no avail. The Saudi blockade, leading to a potentially massive human crisis, has riled Ban, an official said. OCHA says about 80 percent of Yemen's 24 million people need aid.

On May 8, the Saudis snubbed the U.N. again, agreeing to a five-day humanitarian truce with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Paris without U.N. input. But the pause was marred by continued bombing and fighting by both sides.

The Saudis rebuffed their preferred man, Cheikh Ahmed, when he tried to revive the U.N.-led negotiations in a neutral site. They instead held talks on May 18-19 in Riyadh, where they knew the Houthis would never come. Perhaps that was the point.

Ban didn't go either. He sent Cheikh Ahmed. Ban's spokesman virtually ignored the ill-fated conference, merely "taking note" of it. He stressed that all parties must take part in a U.N.-brokered, Yemeni-led process.

Ban Was 'Humiliated'

Following the failed Riyadh conference, Cheikh Ahmed thought he had the parties' agreement to meet in Geneva without pre-conditions at the end of May. But the Saudis yanked the carpet from under Ban, insisting on the pre-condition of implementing an April Security Council resolution that called for Hadi's restoration and Houthi withdrawal from its territorial gains.

The Secretary-General had to postpone the announced meeting four days before it was to begin. "He was humiliated by the Saudis when they did this," a high-ranking U.N. official told me. "He was really furious."

After the Americans applied pressure, meeting separately with Houthi leaders in Oman on May 31, the Saudis finally agreed to indirect Geneva talks. Ban flew to the Swiss city to open the conference on June 15, and met with the Saudi and Hadi delegations. But where were the Houthis?

Their plane was grounded in Djibouti for eight hours because Egypt refused to open its airspace. A senior diplomat familiar with Yemen, told me Egypt,

dependent on Saudi money, kept the Houthis grounded “on instructions” from Riyadh, preventing them from meeting Ban.

The warring parties never met directly, with Cheikh Ahmed only seeing the Houthis in their hotel, where they later held a press conference on June 19 that was disrupted by protestors and devolved into a fistfight on camera.

“Geneva was a fiasco,” a U.N. official said.

A Ramadan Ceasefire?

In Geneva Ban called for a Ramadan ceasefire, backed by the U.S. and European Union, to allow aid into an increasingly desperate country.

On July 8, Hadi wrote a letter to Ban, that has never been released, but which I have seen, that clearly outlines the Hadi/Saudi conditions for such a ceasefire.

The Houthis had to withdraw from Aden, Taiz, Mareb and Shabwa provinces as an initial step. The truce would begin in those provinces once withdrawal was complete. The ceasefire would have gradually been extended to other Yemeni provinces after Houthi withdrawal from those areas. All political prisoners and “arbitrarily detained individuals” had to be released.

If the Houthis made any military move anywhere during the truce, the Saudis could “respond immediately and without prior notice.” The Saudi-led coalition would maintain its air and sea blockades to prevent weapons from getting to the Houthis.

But the U.N. wanted an *unconditional* truce. Despite these very clear conditions, U.N. headquarters was split on whether to announce an *unconditional* truce anyway. The faction that did win: A truce without conditions was announced by Ban’s spokesman Stephane Dujarric on July 9, who said Hadi had accepted the truce and that Ban had “received assurances” from all sides. Ban’s people say Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir promised Ban by telephone that the cease-fire would begin.

But a senior diplomat whom I spoke to was immensely skeptical. “The [U.N.] says [Hadi and the Saudis] accepted the truce, but they accepted with conditions,” he said. “So this whole thing is misleading. They are giving the impression that something is happening, but this will backfire.”

When the truce never happened, the Saudis incredibly said that Hadi, who is in exile in a Riyadh palace, never told them about it. That was the last straw for the Saudis and U.N. “ceasefires.”

U.N. Sidelined

On July 25, the Saudis tried calling for a unilateral truce bypassing the U.N. altogether. The Houthis didn't agree because the U.N. wasn't involved, and the whole thing again collapsed. The United Nations has been effectively sidelined and the fighting has intensified, especially around Aden, which pro-Hadi forces captured last month.

Saudi Arabia has shown contempt for the U.N. before. In 2013, the Kingdom was elected to a coveted, two-year, non-permanent seat on the Security Council after an expensive lobbying campaign. But when the U.S. failed to bomb Syria after the August 2013 chemical attack in Damascus and instead began talking a nuclear deal with the Iranians, the Saudis abruptly renounced the seat in a fit of pique that seemed only to spite itself. It was a sign of a new Saudi independence in international affairs.

"The Saudis are not even listening to the Americans anymore," a U.N. official said, let alone the U.N. "The Americans don't have access to [Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince] Mohammed bin Salman, who is calling the shots. He's young and doesn't care about the Americans." Prince Mohammed this summer visited St. Petersburg, and concluded a \$10 billion Saudi investment with Russia, in spite of American-led sanctions against Moscow.

Saudi Arabia thinks it can win militarily in Yemen and ignore the U.N. until it's time for the clean-up, but ultimately Riyadh "will need the U.N. to put together a power-sharing deal, that will have to include the Houthis," as one U.N. official told me.

Clearly that day hasn't arrived yet. And in the meantime 80 percent of Yemenis need help to survive and Ban Ki-moon privately stewes about it.

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Obama's Stupid Blame-Iran Game

President Obama always bows to Official Washington's conventional wisdom no

matter how wrongheaded it is and then either falls in line behind some reckless neocon policy prescription or turns away just before falling off some geopolitical cliff. His continued Iran-bashing is a case in point, says Gareth Porter at Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

If and when the Iran nuclear agreement gets through Congress, many people in Washington hope that President Barack Obama will articulate a more realistic strategy for the Middle East than what we have heard from his administration in the past. But Obama has evidently decided this is not the time to articulate anything about the region's future that he does not see as helping to sell the agreement on Capitol Hill. The real question is whether there is a clear idea waiting to be made public when the timing is right.

If there was ever an appropriate moment for Obama to articulate an overarching post-agreement policy vision that integrated the Iran nuclear agreement into a broader strategy for dealing with a Middle East at war, it was his speech at American University on Aug. 5. The time and place for the speech were chosen in explicit acknowledgement of President John F. Kennedy's speech at that same university 52 years earlier.

In his speech, JFK offered a vision of a transformation of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union and the Cold War from one of confrontation to negotiations. But instead of using that occasion to explain how U.S. diplomacy might play a transformational role in the Middle East, Obama limited the speech to defending the Vienna agreement in the narrowest terms.

Three days later, in an interview with Fareed Zakaria of CNN, Obama did deal with broader regional problems, but his only firm argument was a response to the attacks on the Vienna agreement for allegedly enabling Iran to increase its assistance to regional allies. He conceded that Iran would be able to continue those activities and even "fund some additional activities" as the nuclear agreement went into operation. But he argued that, if Iran were able to get a nuclear weapon, it would be "emboldened to engage in more of the activities that have been discussed."

Thus Obama chose not to point out that Iran's role in the region since 2013 has not been to support terrorism but to support the primary forces fighting against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Nor did he correct the falsehood that it was Iran rather than Saudi Arabia's reckless air war and support for sectarian forces there. Instead Obama relied on the argument that the situation of alleged Iranian destabilization would be worse if

the agreement were defeated.

Zakaria invited him to correct the false picture being portrayed by critics of the Vienna agreement, asking whether “overlapping interests” between Iran and the United States on ISIS and Afghanistan “might allow for a more productive and constructive relation between the United States and Iran.”

But Obama was clearly reluctant to acknowledge that any real change was in store regarding future relations with Iran. “I think it is conceivable,” he replied, “but the premise of this deal is not that Iran warms toward the United States or that we are engaging in any kind of strategic reassessment of the relationship.”

Then, as if expressing an afterthought, he added a statement that was so indirect that it is difficult to penetrate: “Is there the possibility that having begun conversations around this narrow issue that you start getting some broader discussions about Syria, for example, and the ability of all the parties involved to try to arrive at a political transition that keeps the country intact and does not further fuel the growth of ISIL and other terrorist organizations – I think that’s possible.”

Blaming Iran

In an interview with National Public Radio two days later, Obama suggested that things could improve if Iran changed its ways: “[I]t is possible that as a consequence of this engagement, that as a consequence of Iran being able to recognize that what’s happening in Syria for example is leading to extremism that threatens their own state and not just the United States; that some convergence of interests begins to lead to conversations between, for example, Saudi Arabia and Iran; that Iran starts making different decisions that are less offensive to its neighbors; that it tones down the rhetoric in terms of its virulent opposition to Israel. And, you know, that’s something that we should welcome.”

Then Obama addressed the rest of the region: “There is the possibility that if you look at what’s going on the Middle East right now, more and more states begin to recognize that their enemy is chaos and ISIL and disaffected young people, Shia and Sunni, who are attracted to, you know, ideologies that are in opposition to every regime here. And and that’s something that I think we should be willing to promote if in fact they can get there.”

Both of those interviews were marked by a deliberate avoidance of any explicit admission that the United States might actually want to make any political-diplomatic moves toward cooperation with Iran. As presented by Obama, the most his administration would do is to lecture Iran on what it needed to do to

correct its misbehavior. Possible positive developments were cast in terms of actions that others might take, and subsequent U.S. support for such actions.

Resisting AIPAC Pressure

Of course, that characterization of U.S. policy cannot be taken entirely at face value. His answers represent what he and his advisers regard as the most likely to fend off the assault on the Vienna agreement by an unprecedented lobbying campaign run by AIPAC and its allies.

An optimistic reading of his remarks might interpret them as veiled allusions to diplomatic aims that Obama intends to pursue: cooperation with Iran as well as Russia on a Syrian settlement, efforts to bring Iran and Saudi Arabia together and to get them to reach an accommodation. But such an interpretation would exaggerate the readiness of the Obama administration to break with the political consensus in Washington about Iran and the region.

There are obviously some differences between the administration and its pro-Israel and Saudi critics regarding Iran's regional role. Otherwise Obama would not even acknowledge the possibility of discussions with Iran in the future. But it would be a mistake to ignore the degree to which Obama's weakness in the face of the lobby's arguments about the regional dimension of the agreement reflects its acceptance of the basic premises of those arguments just as it has accepted the lobby's premise that Iran has been trying obtain nuclear weapons.

Obama and senior administration officials have repeated many times in the past two years the mantra that Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism and that its regional role is destabilizing. Key U.S. national security institutions also continue to reinforce that hoary political line on Iran as well.

The well-worn habits of mind of senior officials and institutional interest will certainly continue to impose severe limits on the administration's diplomatic flexibility with regard to both Iran and Saudi Arabia through the end of the Obama administration.

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