

Viewing cable 08RIYADH649, SAUDI KING ABDULLAH AND SENIOR PRINCES ON SAUDI

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SUBJECT: SAUDI KING ABDULLAH AND SENIOR PRINCES ON SAUDI
POLICY TOWARD IRAQ

Classified By: CDA Michael Gfoeller, Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

- 1. (S) Summary: US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus met with Saudi King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, General Presidency of Intelligence Chief Prince Muqrin bin Abd al-Aziz, and Interior Minister Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz during their April 14-15 visit to Riyadh. The Saudi King and senior Princes reviewed Saudi policy toward Iraq in detail, all making essentially the same points. They said that the Kingdom will not send an ambassador to Baghdad or open an embassy until the King and senior Saudi officials are satisfied that the security situation has improved and the Iraqi government has implemented policies that benefit all Iraqis, reinforce Iraq's Arab identity, and resist Iranian influence. The Saudis evinced somewhat greater flexibility regarding the issues of economic and humanitarian assistance for Iraq and debt forgiveness. In a conversation with the Charge' on April 17, Saudi Ambassador to the US Adel al-Jubeir indicated that the King had been very impressed by the visit of Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus, and al-Jubeir hinted that the Saudi government might announce changes to its Iraq policy before the President's visit to Riyadh in mid-May. End Summary.

Positive Signs in Iraq

- 2. (S) In all their meetings with the Saudi royals, both Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus conveyed the progress in Iraq and confirmed the negative role Iran is playing in Iraq. They characterized the recent ISF-led operations in Basra and Baghdad as having a striking effect against the Shia militias, most importantly turning Iraqi public opinion away from the militias. While Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's decision to take action against the militias was described as hasty and not well-planned, Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus emphasized that any tactical shortfalls were overshadowed by the greater positive effect of unifying Iraq and demonstrating the GOI's, and most specifically al-Maliki's, determined resolve to take on the Shia militias, especially Jaysh al-Madhi. Concurrently, these operations unequivocally demonstrated Iran's subversive activities in Iraq and its broader regional ambitions. Throughout all their discussions, Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus stressed the importance and urgent need for the Saudis to join us in supporting Iraq.

The Saudi Embassy Issue

- 3. (S) King Abdullah, the Foreign Minister, and Prince Muqrin all stated that the Saudi government would not send an ambassador to Baghdad or open an embassy there in the near future, citing both security and political grounds in support of this position. The Foreign Minister stated that he had considered dispatching an ambassador and had sent Saudi diplomats to Baghdad to identify a site for the Saudi embassy. However, he said, "the King simply forbade us to go any farther." King Abdullah confirmed this account in a separate meeting with Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus. The King asserted that the security situation in Baghdad was too dangerous for him to risk sending a Saudi ambassador there. "He would immediately become a target for the terrorists and the militias," he said.

- 4. (S) The King also rejected the suggestion that by sending a Saudi ambassador to Baghdad he could give essential political support to the Iraqi government as it struggles to resist Iranian influence and subversion. He expressed lingering doubt on the Iraqi government's willingness to resist Iran. He also repeated his frequently voiced doubts about Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki himself by alluding to his "Iranian connections." The Saudi monarch stated that he does not trust al-Maliki because the Iraqi Prime Minister had "lied" to him in the past by promising to take certain actions and then failing to do so. The King did not say precisely what these allegedly broken promises might have been. He repeated his oft heard view that al-Maliki rules Iraq on behalf of his Shiite sect instead of all Iraqis.

- 5. (S) However, in a potentially significant move, the King did not reject the idea of dispatching a Saudi ambassador to Baghdad completely. Instead, he said that he would consider

doing so after the Iraqi provincial elections are held in the autumn. The conduct of these elections would indicate whether or not the Iraqi government is truly interested in ruling on behalf of all Iraqis or merely in support of the Shia, King Abdullah asserted.

Grudging Acknowledgment of Change in Iraq

- 6. (S) The Foreign Minister signaled another potential softening in Saudi policy by saying that the Kingdom's problem was not with al-Maliki as a person but rather with the conduct of the Iraqi government. The King himself admitted that the Iraqi government's performance has improved in recent months and grudgingly accepted the point that al-Maliki and his security forces have indeed been fighting extremists, specifically Shia extremists in both Basra and Baghdad and Sunni extremists and Al Qaeda in Mosul. However, the King and the senior Princes argued that more time would be required to judge whether the recent change in Iraqi behavior was lasting and sincere. The King suggested that much of the Iraqi government's improved performance is attributable to US prodding rather than change in Iraqi attitudes.

- 7. (S) The Foreign Minister also suggested that the USG should prod Ayatollah Sistani to speak out in favor of a unified Iraq and national reconciliation among different Iraqi sects and groups. "You have paid a heavy price in blood and treasure, and Sistani and his people have benefited directly. You have every right to ask this of him," Prince Saud al-Faisal said.

Possible Saudi Economic Assistance

- 8. (S) The King, Prince Muqrin, and the Foreign Minister all suggested that the Saudi government might be willing to consider the provision of economic and humanitarian assistance to Iraq. Prince Muqrin asked Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus to send him a list of the kinds of assistance that the US government would like to see the Kingdom provide Iraq. Al-Jubeir later told the Charge' that this assistance would be separate from the USD 1 billion in aid that the Saudi government had promised at the Madrid Conference but still not delivered due to security worries. He said that the Madrid commitment consisted of \$500 million in trade credits and \$500 million in project assistance with strict conditionality, along the lines of what the World Bank would require. Al-Jubeir added that the assistance the Saudi government might provide via Prince Muqrin would initially be in the range of \$75-\$300 million.

Possible Debt Relief

- 9. (S) The King noted that Saudi debt relief for Iraq "will come at some point," although he did not say when. Al-Jubeir told the Charge' that debt relief is a real possibility. He also noted that the Saudi government might make changes to its Iraq policy, perhaps including both assistance and debt relief, prior to the President's visit to Riyadh.

The Need to Resist Iran

- 10. (S) The King, Foreign Minister, Prince Muqrin, and Prince Nayif all agreed that the Kingdom needs to cooperate with the US on resisting and rolling back Iranian influence and subversion in Iraq. The King was particularly adamant on this point, and it was echoed by the senior princes as well. Al-Jubeir recalled the King's frequent exhortations to the US to attack Iran and so put an end to its nuclear weapons program. "He told you to cut off the head of the snake," he recalled to the Charge', adding that working with the US to roll back Iranian influence in Iraq is a strategic priority for the King and his government.

- 11. (S) The Foreign Minister, on the other hand, called instead for much more severe US and international sanctions on Iran, including a travel ban and further restrictions on bank lending. Prince Muqrin echoed these views, emphasizing that some sanctions could be implemented without UN approval. The Foreign Minister also stated that the use of military pressure against Iran should not be ruled out.

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- 12. (S) Comment: Saudi attitudes toward Iraq, from the King on down, remain marked by skepticism and suspicion. That said, the Saudis have noticed recent events in Iraq and are eager to work with the US to resist and reverse Iranian encroachment in Iraq. The King was impressed by Ambassador Crocker's and General Petraeus' visit, as were the Foreign Minister, GPI Chief, and Interior Minister. Cautious as ever, the Saudis may nevertheless be willing to consider new measures in the areas of assistance and debt relief, although further discussions will be required to make these ideas a reality. End Comment.

- 13. (U) This cable was reviewed and cleared by Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus.
GFOELLER

Fuente : <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2008/04/08RIYADH649.html#>