

War on Iraq



Saudi Royals Snub Bush, Fund Opposition to U.S. Troops

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Early in November, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, in a memo leaked to the press recommended that Saudi Arabia play a leadership role in talks about Iraq's future. But even before the memo landed on Bush's White House desk, the Saudis

were positioning themselves to directly influence strategy in Iraq:

- While the debate about negotiating with the Iranians and the Syrians raged in America's leading circles, Vice President Dick Cheney flew to Riyadh for talks. Topic of conversation? The safety of Iraq's Sunni minority should American forces disengage. Simply put: the king read the riot act to the vice president.
- A few weeks later the Iraq Study Group asserted that Saudi private citizens, and probably a few members of the Saudi royal family, have been financing the Sunni opposition in Iraq all along. This is the same opposition that is targeting U.S. troops. Last week, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah confirmed that his loyalty must lie with Iraq's Sunni tribal chiefs, even if his support also helps insurgents who have been fighting Americans and the Brits.
- Early in November, the Saudis announced their intention to build a \$10 billion wall (give or take a few billion) on the border with Iraq, with Raytheon as the top bidder. Raytheon, one of America's premier weapons manufacturers, has close ties to the neocons, including Richard Armitage, former undersecretary of state and Sean O'Keefe, secretary of the Navy during the Reagan administration. Raytheon's stock price is hovering near a seven-year high.

The Saudis are clear about their bottom line: If the United States isn't careful about withdrawing from Iraq, the Sunni kingdom will have no other choice but to arm Iraq's Sunnis, especially if the Saudi's arch-rival, Iran, which has already destabilized the regional power equilibrium by launching a nuclear program, rushes into a military vacuum left by the Americans.

Last week in Riyadh, at the end of a two-day summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (a six-country organism including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates), the Saudis announced their interest in developing a joint nuclear energy program. Publicly, Arab officials said the program would be directed at meeting the burgeoning demand for electricity in the region. According to Gulf officials, despite their enormous oil reserves, which power everything from electricity generation to water desalination, the Gulf States need a new source of energy.

"Nuclear technology is an important technology to have for generating power," said Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, at the conclusion of the summit meeting, "and the Gulf states will need it equally."

Few observers doubt that promoting the idea of a joint atomic energy program between the predominantly Sunni Arab states is a way for Saudi Arabia to send a message to the United States that the Arab state will match Tehran's nuclear power if it needs to.

For years now the international press has been awash with reports about a Saudi collaboration with Pakistan to develop a Saudi nuclear program. Early in 2006, the German periodical Cicero reported that satellite imagery obtained by Germany's secret service indicated that Saudi Arabia has set up in Al-Sulayyil, south of Riyadh, a secret underground city and dozens of underground silos for missiles. According to Cicero, those silos may be already armed with long-range Ghauri-type missiles of Pakistani origin. This information was corroborated by John Pike, one of the United States' foremost military analysts. According to Pike, a great part of the financing for the so-called Islamic Bomb, Pakistan's nuclear program, has been provided by Saudi financiers.

How hard can the White House push back on the Saudis? It's the Saudis who are now doing the pushing. Last week Saudi financiers showed their political power by forcing Tony Blair to preemptorily cancel his own government's investigation of a slush fund reportedly kicking back 32 percent to Saudi royals on their military purchases from Great Britain. The Saudis reportedly told Blair they'd never buy British weaponry again if their Swiss bank accounts were investigated by the Brits.

"The Saudis think a nasty civil war in Iraq could quickly sour into an even nastier regional war," Pike says, "so they're not in a real patient mood."

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