

Is Saudi Arabia on the edge?

By David Ignatius

By appointing Prince Bandar bin Sultan as its new intelligence chief, Saudi Arabia has installed what looks like a war cabinet at a time of rising tensions with Iran and growing internal dissent from its Shiite minority.

The Saudis have also heightened their alert level in other ways to prepare for possible regional conflict. Some Saudi military and security personnel were mobilized last month — called back from summer leave or told to cancel planned vacations. One explanation of the mobilization making the rounds in Riyadh is that the Saudis expected that Turkey might retaliate against Syria for the shoot-down of one of its fighters in late June.

The installation of a new intelligence chief came as Saudi Arabia was stepping up its support for insurgents in Syria seeking to topple the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. In this covert effort, the Saudis are working with the United States, France, Turkey, Jordan and other nations that want Assad out.

Bandar will succeed Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz, who was barely visible in the West during his years as Saudi intelligence chief. This led to widespread comment that Muqrin had been fired, but he is said to retain the confidence of King Abdullah, who will use him as a special emissary to Pakistan and other Muslim nations where Muqrin's traditional Saudi demeanor will be useful.

Bandar, the flamboyant former ambassador to Washington, had appeared to be sidelined in the past several years because of poor health and personal issues. His appointment now as intelligence chief probably signals the desire of both King Abdullah and the new Crown Prince Salman to have an experienced covert operator to handle sensitive foreign contacts at a time of sharply rising tensions.

Bandar would be a useful intermediary, for example, if Saudi Arabia sought nuclear weapons or ballistic missile technology from China to defend against such threats from Iran. Bandar was the go-between in a secret 1987 missile deal with China, known as "East Wind." Bandar has also been active in secret missions with Syria and Lebanon for decades, and the Wall Street Journal reported that he helped arrange a recent visit to Saudi Arabia by Gen. Manaf Tlass, the highest-ranking Syrian defector.

Bandar is especially well-placed to manage intelligence liaison with the United States, given his two decades here as ambassador. Bandar maintained close relations with the CIA during Ronald Reagan's presidency, and was said to have helped organize secret funding for joint Saudi-American covert actions in the Middle East. During the run-up to the 1991 Gulf War, Bandar was so close to President George

H.W. Bush that he became known as “Bandar Bush,” a moniker that continued under President George W. Bush.

Bandar continued to play a behind-the-scenes role even after he left Washington in 2005. He was said, for example, to support Vice President Dick Cheney’s confrontational policy against Iran, to the consternation of Prince Turki al-Faisal, his successor as ambassador, who was working with less hawkish members of the Bush administration.

Interestingly, Bandar has been a special target for Iranian media attacks in recent days. Iran’s Press TV on Aug. 2 described him as “the linchpin in the ‘dastardly subterfuges’ of the CIA and Mossad against Syria.” Press TV also carried an uncorroborated report early last week claiming that Bandar had been assassinated; the rumor was rebutted Friday by a source who said that Bandar had been in telephone contact with non-Saudis.

At home, the Saudis have been struggling to contain Shiite protests in Al-Qatif, in the kingdom’s oil-rich eastern province. Those protests, which the Saudis believe are Iran-inspired, led to two deaths in early July, according to a July 9 BBC report. The demonstrations continued last week and there were reports of more casualties.

The Saudis haven’t been able to stop the insurgency in Al-Qatif; indeed, it appears to be worsening. The protesters may hope to provoke the Saudis into a bloody crackdown, which would leave scores dead and encourage much wider demonstrations and international outcry. So far, the Saudis have avoided such an escalation through relatively restrained tactics. Saudi reformers argue that the best way to quell Shiite protests is to give them the full economic and political rights of citizenship.

Iran’s Press TV on July 27 featured an interview with an analyst headlined: “Collapse of al-Saud regime becomes more realistic than before.” The information may have been Tehran’s propaganda, but it helps explain why the Saudi monarchy is going to battle stations.

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