

Policy Watch: Saudi Arabia and Iraq

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In a Nov. 29 Washington Post op-ed piece, the well-connected Saudi analyst, Nawaf Obaid, warned that the Kingdom would provide aid to Iraqi Sunnis if American forces withdrew from Iraq. The Saudi Press Agency quickly issued a statement from an unnamed "official source" saying that Obaid's op-ed "does not represent any official Saudi authority." Obaid's op-ed had, in fact, stated that the opinions he expressed were "his own and do not reflect official Saudi policy." To underline the truth of that, the outgoing Saudi ambassador to Washington, Prince Turki al-Faisal, terminated Obaid's consultancy with the Saudi Embassy.

Yet despite this public repudiation, it has subsequently become apparent that Obaid's views do reflect official Saudi policy, at least to some extent. The New York Times on Dec. 12 reported that Saudi King Abdallah told Vice President Cheney during the latter's recent visit to Riyadh that the Kingdom, "might provide financial backing to Iraqi Sunnis in any war against Iraq's Shiites if the United States pulls its troops out of Iraq." In fact, this may already be taking place informally. The Washington Post reported (also on Dec. 12) that, "Young Saudi men have joined the Sunni insurgency as foreign fighters, while there have been persistent reports that Saudi citizens have provided financial aid to the Sunni insurgency."

Why would Saudi Arabia support those forces in Iraq who have been most fiercely opposed to the American military presence there? There are two reasons. First, much of the largely Sunni Saudi public genuinely sympathizes with the Iraqi Sunnis. As Obaid noted, some of the "major Saudi tribal confederations ... have extremely close historical and communal ties with their counterparts in Iraq." Second, the Saudis fear that with America gone, Iran and its Iraqi Shiite allies will quickly come to dominate all Iraq and then be in a position to threaten Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

What exactly, though, would Saudi Arabia do if the United States left Iraq? For while it does not want Iran to dominate Iraq or Arab Sunnis there to be driven out by Arab Shiites, the Kingdom does not want to get directly involved in the fighting with its own forces.

A guide to what Saudi policy toward an Iraq civil war might actually be after a U.S. withdrawal (or what it may now informally be even beforehand) may be found through studying Saudi policy toward civil war in another neighboring country: North Yemen from 1962 to 1970. In 1962, Egypt-backed revolutionary officers overthrew the newly installed king and declared a "republic." Egyptian forces quickly arrived to support it. The king, however, managed to escape from his palace and rally many tribesmen to the "royalist" cause.

From 1962 to 1967, as many as 70,000 Egyptian troops were in North Yemen trying, unsuccessfully, to defeat the royalists. Part of the reason they were unsuccessful was that Saudi Arabia backed the royalists. The Kingdom did not send its own troops to North Yemen, but simply provided sufficient assistance to the Yemeni royalists in order to prevent them from being defeated.

Following its defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Egypt soon thereafter withdrew all its troops from North Yemen. But instead of taking advantage of the Egyptian withdrawal to send its own forces to help the royalists defeat the republicans, Riyadh helped mediate between the two sides. In 1970, a peace agreement was reached leaving the republic in place but allowing the

royalists (except for the Yemeni royal family itself) to return. The republican government remained on close, friendly terms with Saudi Arabia for the next twenty years (What happened after that is too complicated to explain here).

What this suggests is that Riyadh is most concerned with preventing another state coming to dominate the country where the civil war is taking place --Egypt in North Yemen, and Iran in Iraq. In each case, Saudi Arabia will back the local party fighting to oppose this -- the royalists in North Yemen, and the Sunni Arabs in Iraq. But once the other state quits the fight, the Saudis are perfectly willing to work with the local forces those other states were supporting.

Egypt left North Yemen both because it had been unable to prevail there after five years of trying and because its defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war put its leadership in a position where it badly needed Saudi aid. Will Iran suffer similar setbacks in Iraq after an American withdrawal? There can be no guarantee that it will. It should be remembered, though, that during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi Shiites fought with Saddam against Iran. Iraqi Shiites are also Arabs and do not want Persian domination. Further, the Iraqi Shiites are divided. If Iran supports one Shiite group (such as the Badr Brigades) over another (such as the Mahdi Army), the latter may well be willing to accept support from Saudi Arabia.

In other words, if Iran can be prevented from dominating Iraq after a U.S. withdrawal for long enough that it stops trying to do so (assuming that it does), the North Yemeni experience suggests that Saudi Arabia will stop supporting Iraqi Sunnis exclusively and seek a compromise among all parties to bring the Iraqi civil war to a peaceful conclusion. The wording used by the unnamed official source in distancing the Saudi government from Obaid's op-ed, which noted the "Kingdom's policy and stand to support security, unity and stability of Iraq with all its sects and doctrines," hints that this may indeed be what Riyadh has in mind.

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