

A Saudi Prince Tied to Bush Is Sounding Off-Key



King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh in March, during a meeting of Arab heads of state in which he called the United States presence in Iraq “an illegal foreign occupation,” infuriating the White House.

Awad Awad/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By Helene Cooper and Jim Rutenberg

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WASHINGTON, April 28 No foreign diplomat has been closer or had more access to President Bush, his family and his administration than the magnetic and fabulously wealthy Prince Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia.

Prince Bandar has mentored Mr. Bush and his father through three wars and the broader campaign against terrorism, reliably delivering sometimes in the Oval Office his nation’s support for crucial Middle East initiatives dependent on the regional legitimacy the Saudis could bring, as well as timely warnings of Saudi regional priorities that might put it into apparent conflict with the United States. Even after his 22-year term as Saudi ambassador ended in 2005, he still seemed the insider’s insider. But now, current and former Bush administration officials are wondering if the longtime reliance on him has begun to outlive its usefulness.

Bush administration officials have been scratching their heads over steps taken by Prince Bandar’s uncle, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, that have surprised them by going against the American playbook, after receiving assurances to the contrary from Prince Bandar during secret trips he made to Washington.

For instance, in February, King Abdullah effectively torpedoed plans by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for a high-profile peace summit meeting between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, by brokering a power-sharing agreement with Mr. Abbas’s Fatah and Hamas that did not require Hamas to recognize Israel or forswear violence. The Americans had believed, after discussions with Prince Bandar, that the Saudis were on board with the strategy of isolating Hamas.

American officials also believed, again after speaking with Prince Bandar, that the Saudis might agree to direct engagement with Israel as part of a broad American plan to jump-start Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. King Abdullah countermanded that plan.

Most biting, during a speech before Arab heads of state in Riyadh three weeks ago, the king condemned the American invasion of Iraq as “an illegal foreign occupation.” The Bush administration, caught off guard, was infuriated, and administration officials have found Prince Bandar hard to reach since.

Since the Iraq war and the attendant plummeting of America’s image in the Muslim world, King Abdullah has been striving to set a more independent and less pro-American course, American and Arab officials said. And that has steered America’s relationship with its staunchest Arab ally into uncharted waters. Prince Bandar, they say, may no longer be able to serve as an unerring beacon of Saudi intent.

“The problem is that Bandar has been pursuing a policy that was music to the ears of the Bush administration, but was not what King Abdullah had in mind at all,” said Martin S. Indyk, a former United States ambassador to Israel who is now head of the Brookings Institution’s Saban Center for Middle East Policy.

Of course it is ultimately the king and not the prince who makes the final call on policy. More than a dozen associates of Prince Bandar, including personal friends and Saudi officials who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that if his counsel has led to the recent misunderstandings, it is due to his longtime penchant for leaving room

in his dispatches for friends to hear what they want to hear. That approach, they said, is catching up to the prince as new tensions emerge between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Bandar, son of one of the powerful seven sons born to the favorite wife of Saudi Arabia's founding king, "needs to personally regroup and figure out how to put Humpty Dumpty together again," one associate said.

Robert Jordan, a former Bush administration ambassador to Saudi Arabia, said the Saudis' mixed signals have come at a time when King Abdullah who has ruled the country since 1995 but became king only in 2005 after the death of his brother, Fahd has said he does not want to go down in history as Mr. Bush's Arab Tony Blair. "I think he feels the need as a kind of emerging leader of the Arab world right now to maintain a distance," he said.

Mr. Jordan said that although the United States and Saudi Arabia "have different views on how to get there," the countries still share the same long-term goals for the region and remain at heart strong allies.

An administration spokesman, Gordon D. Johndroe, said none of the current issues threatened the relationship. "We may have differences on issues now and then," he said, "but we remain close allies."

The Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan.
Alex Wong/Getty Images

Or, as Saleh al-Kallab, a former minister of information in Jordan, put it, "The relationship between the United States and the Arab regimes is like a Catholic marriage where you can have no divorce."

But there can be separation. And several associates of Prince Bandar acknowledge that he feels caught between the opposing pressure of the king and that of his close friends in the Bush administration. It is a relationship that Prince Bandar has fostered with great care and attention to detail over the years, making himself practically indispensable to Mr. Bush, his family and his aides.

A few nights after he resigned his post as secretary of state two years ago, Colin L. Powell answered a ring at his front door. Standing outside was Prince Bandar, then Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, with a 1995 Jaguar. Mr. Powell's wife, Alma, had once mentioned that she missed their 1995 Jaguar, which she and her husband had traded in. Prince Bandar had filed that information away, and presented the Powells that night with an identical, 10-year-old model. The Powells kept the car a gift that the State Department said was legal but recently traded it away.

The move was classic Bandar, who has been referred to as Bandar Bush, attending birthday celebrations, sending notes in times of personal crisis and entertaining the Bushes or top administration officials at sumptuous dinner parties at Prince Bandar's opulent homes in McLean, Va., and Aspen, Colo.

He has invited top officials to pizza and movies out at a mall in suburban Virginia and then rented out the movie theater (candy served chair-side, in a wagon) and the local Pizza Hut so he and his guests could enjoy themselves in solitude. He is said to feel a strong sense of loyalty toward Mr. Bush's father dating to the Persian Gulf war, which transferred to the son, whom he counseled about international diplomacy during Mr. Bush's first campaign for president.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, as the United States learned that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi and focused on the strict Wahhabi school of Islam that informed them and their leader and fellow Saudi, Osama bin Laden, Prince Bandar took a public role in assuring the Americans that his nation would cooperate in investigating and combating anti-American terrorism. He also helped arrange for more than a hundred members of the bin Laden family to be flown out of the United States.

Even since he left the Saudi ambassador's post in Washington and returned to Saudi Arabia two years ago, Prince Bandar has continued his long courtship, over decades, of the Bush family and Vice President Dick Cheney, flying into Washington for unofficial meetings at the White House. He cruises in without consulting the Saudi Embassy in Washington, where miffed officials have sometimes said they had no idea that he was in town a perceived slight that contributed to the resignation of his cousin Prince Turki al-Faisal as ambassador to the United States last year. He has been succeeded by Adel al-Jubeir, who is said to have strong support from the king.

Prince Turki was never able to match the role of Prince Bandar, whom the president, vice president and other officials regularly consult on every major Middle East initiative from the approach to Iran to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to Iraq. Prince Bandar played a crucial role in securing the use of the Prince Sultan Air Base at Al Kharj, roughly 70 miles outside Riyadh, in the attacks led by the United States against Afghanistan and Iraq, despite chafing within his government.

He helped in the negotiations that led to Libya giving up its weapons programs, a victory for Mr. Bush. He pledged to protect the world economy from oil shocks after the invasion, the White House said in 2004, but he denied a report, by the author Bob Woodward, that he had promised to stabilize oil prices in time for Mr. Bush's re-election campaign.

The cause of the latest friction in the American-Saudi relationship began in 2003, before the invasion of Iraq. The Saudis agreed with the Bush view of Saddam Hussein as a threat, but voiced concern about post-invasion contingencies and the fate of the Sunni minority. When it became clear that the administration was committed to invading Iraq, Prince Bandar took a lead role in negotiations between the Bush administration and Saudi officials over securing bases and staging grounds.

But Saudi frustration has mounted over the past four years, as the situation in Iraq has deteriorated. King Abdullah was angry that the Bush administration ignored his advice against de-Baathification and the disbanding of the Iraqi military. He became more frustrated as America's image in the Muslim world deteriorated, because Saudi Arabia is viewed as a close American ally.

Tensions between King Abdullah and top Bush officials escalated further when Mr. Bush announced a new energy initiative to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign oil during his 2006 State of the Union address, and announced new initiatives in that direction this year.

Both American and Saudi officials say that King Abdullah clearly values and uses Prince Bandar's close relationship with the White House. And that, associates said, will dictate what Prince Bandar can do.

"Don't expect the man, because he happens to have an American background, not to play the game for his home team," said William Simpson, Prince Bandar's biographer, and a former classmate at the Royal Air Force College in England. "The home team is Saudi Arabia."