

AS THE ARAB SPRING GIVES WAY TO THE SUNNI SUMMER

The AP has a interesting—and interestingly timed—story on the help we’re giving Saudi Arabia to build a “facilities security force” to protect, among other things, its oil fields and planned civilian nuclear sites. The story is based, in part, on this WikiLeaks cable.

Note the date of the cable: October 29, 2008, less than a week before—everyone already knew at the time—Barack Obama would be elected President.

That makes the actual content of the cable all the more interesting. It describes a meeting between US Department of Energy representatives and Mohammed bin Naif, the Assistant Minister of Interior and the son of the long-time Minister of Interior, Naif bin Abdul-Aziz, as well as other representatives from Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Interior. Basically, the DOE folks gave a presentation about the vulnerabilities in the Abqaiq oil processing plant, after which bin Naif agreed to a broad security program, including the FSF.

Remember, DOE was giving a presentation about an oil facility that had already been attacked by al Qaeda as part of plan to get Saudi Arabia to agree to this 35,000 person force in Saudi Arabia.

At the meeting at which this cooperation was agreed to, CENTCOM handed bin Naif a document describing the exact language Saudi Arabia should use request CENTCOM’s help establishing the FSF. The plan was that Saudi Arabia would then present that request (the one the US wrote) to General Petraeus when he came to Saudi Arabia on November 8 (which would be after Obama’s expected election, but not by much).

█ The draft [Letter of Request] for OPM-

FSF prepared by CENTCOM was presented to MBN. This draft explicitly lays out on one page the exact wording for the SAG's formal request to the USG to establish OPM-FSF. MBN directed his staff to prepare such a letter for his signature. Once we receive this letter, CENTCOM will then respond with a Letter of Acceptance (LOA) which will allow CENTCOM to begin building up OPM-FSF's personnel and equipment structure. MOI indicated they plan to present the formal Saudi LOR to GEN Petraeus when he visits the Kingdom, currently scheduled for Nov. 8.

In addition, the cable describes bin Naif's urgent desire—expressed privately to the US Charge d'Affaires—to solidify this partnership quickly, also mentioning his plan to travel to the US on November 5-7 (that is, the days after Obama's expected election).

In a private meeting between MBN and the Charge', MBN conveyed the SAG's, and his personal, sense of urgency to move forward as quickly as possible to enhance the protection of Saudi Arabia's critical infrastructure with the priority being its energy production sites. MBN related how his grandfather, King Abdulaziz, had the vision of forming a lasting strategic partnership with the United States. MBN stressed he shared this vision, and wants the USG's help to protect Saudi critical infrastructure. He commented that neither the Kingdom nor the U.S. would be comfortable with the "French or Russians" involved in protecting Saudi oil facilities. "We built ARAMCO together, we must protect it together." MBN also confirmed his travel dates to Washington will be Nov. 5 to 7.

In other words, the whole thing seems like

something formalized quickly just as Obama was being elected President.

One more interesting detail about the cable? Note who appears at the top of the distribution list: Dick Cheney.

WHITE HOUSE FOR OVP

Okay, so that's the cable. Using the fear that al Qaeda would attack Saudi Arabia's oil fields in a repeat of the 2006 attack on Abqaiq, the US (presumably largely directed by Cheney) pushed through the agreement for this 35,000 person elite force just as Obama was being elected President.

So let's return to the AP article. The article provides some key context for the FSF—notably that it seems to have been a quid pro quo tied to our agreement to give Saudi Arabia civilian nukes.

The new arrangement is based on a May 2008 deal signed by then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef. That same month the U.S. and Saudi Arabia also signed an understanding on civil nuclear energy cooperation in which Washington agreed to help the Saudis develop nuclear energy for use in medicine, industry and power generation.

So we give Saudi Arabia nukes that it wants (in part) because Iran is working hard to get them, and it lets us "train" a 35,000 person elite force to guard its critical infrastructure in the name of counter-terrorism. Are you having an Erik Prince moment, yet?

The rest of the article—that part not reliant on the WikiLeaks cable, that is—only partly focuses on the FSF itself—at least on the troops tasked with defending oil infrastructure. In addition, it focuses on missile defense and other arms targeted at Iran.

The U.S. also is in discussions with Saudi Arabia to create an air and missile defense system with far greater capability against the regional rival the Saudis fear most, Iran. And it is with Iran mainly in mind that the Saudis are pressing ahead with a historic \$60 billion arms deal that will provide dozens of new U.S.-built F-15 combat aircraft likely to ensure Saudi air superiority over Iran for years.

All of which the AP article notes is going forward in spite of Saudi concerns that the US let Mubarak fall.

All of this is happening despite the Saudi government's anger at Washington's response to uprisings across the Arab world, especially its abandonment of Hosni Mubarak, the deposed Egyptian president who was a longtime Saudi and U.S. ally. The Obama administration is eager to ease this tension as it faces the prospect of an escalating confrontation with Iran over its nuclear program.

Of course, the Saudis are only so pissed with our response to the Arab Spring. After all, in addition to letting Mubarak fall, we've also let Saudi Arabia respond to a request (presumably one that looks a lot like Saudi Arabia's request to use for the FSF) from Bahrain to go help it destroy the Shiite opposition in its country. Here's the kind of thing we've allowed to go on in the country that hosts our Fifth Fleet:

[Abdulahdi Alkhawaja, Angry Arabiya's father] told [his family] that last Friday he was escorted by 4 individuals in a white Sedan to an unknown location in a room where there was a video camera; a man there told him that he was a representative of the King and he began to question him. After the

questioning, he was asked if he would like to apologize to the King, Mr. Alkhawaja responded, that as he had said in the Military prosecution he will only apologize if it turns out that what he has said is based on anything but the truth. Mr. Alkhawaja added (speaking to his family) that he feared that his words would be edited to seem like an apology. He was then asked again if he would like to apologize and he refused. Then he was taken to another room where the 4 men started to use foul language and threatened him with rape and that they would catch his daughter, BCHR activist Maryam Alkhawaja (who had recently participated in a congressional hearing on Bahrain), and rape her too. At this point the men started undressing and showing their private parts after which they started touching Mr. Alkhawaja inappropriately. When they tried to take off his pants, he threw himself down and started hitting his head on the ground continuously until he almost passed out. Seeing this they returned him to his prison cell. The doctor that examined Mr. Alkhawaja is afraid that this incident might cause complications with his head injuries that he sustained when he was arrested and has therefore scheduled an x-ray for today. [my emphasis]

The Arab Spring seems to be evolving, quickly, from a democratic uprising to an opportunity the US will use to solidify Sunni—that is, Saudi—hegemony in the Middle East. Here's a warning about such a development from Marc Lynch.

Key U.S. allies in its efforts to contain and pressure Iran have either fallen from power or face serious internal threats, the Libya war has further undermined the logic of nuclear

negotiations, Israeli and Saudi fears are growing, and the risk of an unwanted and disastrous war has grown.

Upheaval [a report on Iran Lynch just released] argues that the Obama administration's strategy towards Iran had been more successful in the narrow task of pressuring Tehran than many had expected, but that the foundations of its strategy of containment are rapidly crumbling. At the same time, Iran has had difficulty taking advantage of the struggles of some of its key Arab rivals, partly because of the powerful memory of its 2009 repression of its own protest movement and partly because of the emergence of more attractive competitors for the leadership of the "Resistance" such as Turkey and the new Egypt. The Saudi-led counter-revolution, particularly in Bahrain, threatens to repolarize the region in ways which could revive Iran's appeal across the region and undermine American efforts to reach out to emerging Arab publics. The risk of a rapid escalation to war along a range of flashpoints, from Israel's borders to the Gulf, is higher than many believe – and such a war would radically repolarize the region, most likely against the United States.

Given that the Obama Administration wants to replace PJ Crowley with a former Cheney aide, I worry that Obama won't listen to the wise counsel of Lynch.