HOT AND COLD RUNNING BANDAR

Yesterday, just weeks after the time Al Arabiya announced Prince Bandar bin Sultan would resume his duties as head of Saudi intelligence (and therefore the mastermind of the Saudi-backed effort to oust Bashar al-Assad), Bandar was replaced by a little-known deputy.

He had resumed his position in March, just two days before the President visited the Kingdom.

> Prince Bandar bin Sultan is on his way back to Riyadh where he will resume his tasks as head of Saudi Intelligence,reported news portal NOW Lebanon.
>
> An informed Saudi source confirmed the report to Al Arabiya News.
>
> "This is without doubt bad news for Tehran, Damascus and Hezbollah, particularly that anti-Saudi media has been propagating false information for the past two months that Prince Bandar's absence has been due to his dismissal and due to a Saudi decision to back away from its policies regarding the regional conflict," said the source in Riyadh.
>
> The source confirms that Prince Bandar has actually been away due to medical reasons, however, he has resumed his activities this week from the Moroccan city of Marrakesh; where he has been recovering and where he has met with former Lebanese PM Saad Hariri and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed.

But today he's out.

> Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan has been relieved of his post at his request, the official

> Saudi Press Agency reported Tuesday.
>
> The royal decree announcing that Prince Bandar was stepping down as president of General Intelligence gave no reasons for the move. He has been replaced by General Yousef Al Idrissi, the decree said.

I'm not sure anyone knows what these tea leaves mean. It may be that the "shoulder" injury Bandar had been treated for remains a serious health issue. It may be that — as one piece suggested — he retains some power here and has not ceded it back to Mohammed bin Nayef, who had taken over before Bandar's return in March. It may be that this and King Abdullah's designation of Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz as second in succession were done to time with Obama's visit, to signal that America's more favored successor, Mohammed bin Nayef, was not going to take over any time soon.

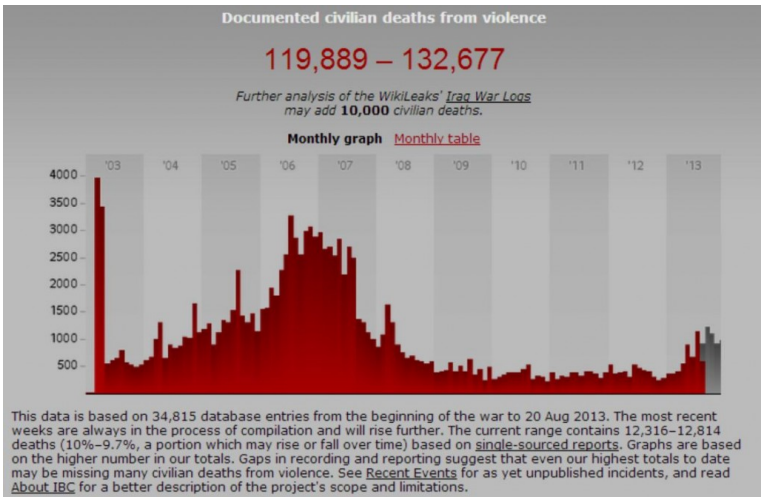
But it also comes among two other developments that may be related. First, since about the beginning of the year and increasingly in recent weeks, the Saudis are actually cracking down on terrorism, both real — including those who went to fight in Syria — and imagined. Perhaps the former, too, was a show for the US. But it did seem to reflect some concerns that Saudi efforts in Syria were increasing security concerns for the Kingdom (as well as other countries in the region and not).

Perhaps most interesting, however, is that the same day that Bandar got "sacked" videos started showing opposition figures in Syria with US made anti-tank missiles, which is the kind of thing Bandar has decades of experience arranging. We'll see whether those disappear like Bandar or represent a new escalation of efforts to oust Assad.

AFTER PETRAEUS PAID THEM FOR PEACE, ARE SUNNIS OF ANBAR NOW PAID BY BANDAR FOR KILLING?

Iraq has been seeping back into the headlines lately, as civilian deaths there have now reached a level last seen in 2008. What is striking about this increase is that it did not occur until almost 18 months after the last US troops left Iraq.

Here is a screen capture of the latest data on civilian deaths in Iraq by Iraq Body Count:



Recall that the final US troops left Iraq in the middle of December, 2011. The civilian death rate had leveled off in 2010 and remained steady throughout all of 2012, not rising significantly until May of 2013. Recall that earlier this week, conclusions of a National Intelligence Estimate on Afghanistan were leaked, suggesting that should the US completely withdraw troops from Afghanistan as we did in Iraq, the situation would deteriorate very rapidly. With Iraq now at high levels of violence, it would be very easy for politicians to lose sight of the

very long gap between withdrawal of our troops and the rise in civilian deaths. Iraq should not be used as a cautionary tale against complete withdrawal though, since there was such a long gap between the withdrawal and the degradation of security.

Recall that David Petraeus was quick to accept praise for the drop in civilian death rates that began in late 2007 and continued throughout 2008. Many attributed this calming to Petraeus' surge and others ascribed it to the "Anbar Awakening" that Petraeus exploited:

> Controversially, he even started putting some Sunni groups — including some that had previously fought the U.S. — on the American payroll. The "Anbar Awakening" of Sunni groups willing to cooperate with the Americans had begun in 2005, but at a smaller scale. Petraeus recognized that the groups had real community influence and ability to bring security, whether he liked them or not, and brought them on board. At the program's peak in 2008, the U.S. had "contracted" 103,000 fighters who were now ostensibly paid to assist an American-dominated peace rather than the disrupt it. That same year, according to Ricks, the U.S. signed ceasefire deals with 779 separate Iraqi militias.

Other analysts, especially Daniel Davis, came to the conclusion that most of the decline in violence was due to Sunni citizens in Anbar rejecting the extreme violence to which al Qaeda had sunk and especially its toll on fellow Muslims.

> As is well known, the turning point in 2007 Iraq came when the heart of the Sunni insurgency turned against al-Qaeda and joined with US Forces against them, dramatically reducing the violence in Iraq almost overnight. The overriding reason the Sunni insurgency turned

> towards the United States was because after almost two years of internal conflict between what ought to have been natural allies – al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the greater Sunni insurgency – a tipping point was reached whereby the Iraqi Sunnis finally and decisively turned against AQI. Had this unnatural split not occurred, by all accounts I have been given on both the Iraqi side and the US military side, "we would still be fighting in Iraq today," in the words of two officers I know who fought there.

Although there likely are many factors that contributed to the eventual outbreak of violence in Iraq that elevated civilian death rates, one possibility that intrigues me is that the timing fits reasonably well to be a part of Saudi intelligence chief Bandar bin Sultan's play for regional dominance. Marcy noted this week that the recent bombings in Russia fit with Bandar's warning delivered to Putin in a secret meeting last July. But if we go back to the report on that meeting, we see this about Bandar's regional plan and especially how it applied to Syria:

> Bandar discussed the Syrian issue at length. He explained how the kingdom's position had evolved on the Syrian crisis since the Daraa incident all the way to what is happening today. He said, "The Syrian regime is finished as far as we and the majority of the Syrian people are concerned. [The Syrian people] will not allow President Bashar al-Assad to remain at the helm. The key to the relations between our two countries starts by understanding our approach to the Syrian issue. So you have to stop giving [the Syrian regime] political support, especially at the UN Security Council, as well as military and economic support. And we guarantee you

> that Russia's interests in Syria and on the Mediterranean coast will not be affected one bit. In the future, Syria will be ruled by a moderate and democratic regime that will be directly sponsored by us and that will have an interest in understanding Russia's interests and role in the region."

So, back in July, Bandar was feeling confident that Assad would be overthrown and that those who established a new government would be firmly under Saudi control. That would suggest that Bandar felt he already had the proper forces in place and under his control.

As we know, things didn't quite go the way Bandar expected in Syria, as the US backed off an attack at the last minute and chose a diplomatic approach with Syria surrendering its chemical weapons. Bandar has continued his meddling, though, and one of his charges just got arrested for activity in Lebanon:

> Lebanese military authorities have arrested the leader of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, the offshoot of al-Qaeda that claimed responsibility for the double suicide bomb attack on the Iranian Embassy in Beirut in November, according to Lebanese news media.
>
> The leader, Majid al-Majid, is a Saudi national whose radical Sunni group is closely allied with al-Qaeda in Iraq. The reports did not say when the arrest took place.
>
> The Abdullah Azzam Brigades came into being years before the conflict across the border in Syria, but the group has allied itself with extremists among the rebels fighting President Bashar Assad there and threatened more attacks if the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah did not stop sending its fighters to support him. Recently, Al-Majid reportedly

> pledged allegiance to the Nusra Front, another al-Qaeda-linked group fighting in Syria.

Hmm. Saudi support for a group in Iraq that is meddling both in Syria and Lebanon. Have a look at the CIA map of the regions we are discussing here:



The Anbar Province of Iraq (along with the much more peaceful Jordan) is what separates Saudi Arabia from Syria. It's looking to me that Bandar decided that if Petraeus could pay off the Sunnis of Anbar to be peaceful, he could find a price at which they would help him with his plan for regional dominance.

JUST ON TIME … BANDAR'S PROMISED TERROR ATTACKS?

Back in July, Bandar bin Sultan met with Vladimir Putin. As part of an effort to buy off Putin's support of Bashar al-Assad, Bandar allegedly promised to be able to prevent terrorist attacks tied to the Sochi Olympics.

> As an example, **I can give you a guarantee to protect the Winter Olympics in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea next year**. The Chechen groups that threaten the security of the games are controlled by us, and they will not move in the Syrian territory's direction without coordinating with us. These groups do not scare us. We use them in the face of the Syrian regime but they will have no role or influence in Syria's political future." [my emphasis]

Admittedly, this version of the threat was Putin's version of it, and admittedly Putin has his own history of allowing attacks to happen.

But Bandar has made such threats before, with more reliable countries. And Bandar's surrogates have been issuing implicit threats since his July "warning."

So as we follow the aftermath of the two attacks in Volgograd in two days, and as we get closer to the February start date for the Olympics, it's worth remembering that Bandar boasted of controlling the Islamic terrorists in Russia.

“BANDAR IS NOW CLEARLY THE TIP OF THE SPEAR”

Back in October, in response to the Saudis taking their toys and going home from the UN, I warned, “I worry they disengaged from the UN because they are considering alternative means of pursuing their interests, means that would be loudly condemned in that body.”

Yesterday, Dick Cheney lackey John Hannah wrote a remarkable screed about Saudi complaints. It starts by warning that Obama’s Iran deal’s “greatest impact is not ensuring that Iran doesn’t get the bomb, but that the Saudis will.” In part to support this, he describes Mr. Tip of the Spear’s close consultations with the Pakistanis (who not only have the bomb but have thousands of our troops held hostage to supply lines through Pakistan).

> Bandar is now clearly the tip of the spear in King Abdullah’s efforts to combat the Iranian threat around the region — not to mention the principal point of contact in the kingdom’s thick relationship with Pakistan’s military and intelligence establishment.

Then after laying out the Saudi complaints (basically, that the US is not serving as meat in its efforts to extend its hegemony over the region), and after condemning John Kerry with a mix of emasculation and Saudi distrust, Hannah issues the threat Bandar likely suggested he issue:

> An atmosphere this poisonous is dangerous, to say the least. The incentive for the Saudis to engage in all kinds of self-help that Washington would find less than beneficial, even destructive, is significant and rising. Driven into a corner, feeling largely

> abandoned by their traditional superpower patron, no one should doubt that the Saudis will do what they believe is necessary to ensure their survival. It would be a mistake to underestimate their capacity to deliver some very unpleasant surprises: from the groups they feel compelled to support in their escalating proxy war with Iran, to the price of oil, to their sponsorship (and bankrolling) of a much expanded regional role for Russia and China at America's expense.

Ultimately, Hannah is warning that the Saudis will get — and, the suggestion is, with his language about "a very, very high price in blood, treasure, and U.S. interests," use — the bomb.

But I can't help but return to his focus on Bandar bin Sultan, who had financial ties (via donations to charities) and potential foreknowledge of Saudi ties to the 9/11 attacks. Former Senator Bob Graham has renewed his effort to bring attention to the Saudi role in the attack, though that never seems to go anywhere. And whether you consider ops like Iran-Contra terrorism or not, Bandar is clearly the master of covert ops.

What kind of self-help has Bandar insinuated to Hannah he plans to pursue?

DID CHUCK HAGEL CUT OFF POOR BANDAR?

I'm working on a longer post on how Saudi King Abdullah took all his toys and went home because we wouldn't start an illegal war at his behest.

But for the moment, I want to look at a passage

from this article reporting a Bandar bin Sultan tantrum.

> Diplomats and officials familiar with events recounted two previously undisclosed episodes during the buildup to the aborted Western strike on Syria that allegedly further unsettled the Saudi-U.S. relationship.
>
> In the run-up to the expected U.S. strikes, Saudi leaders asked for detailed U.S. plans for posting Navy ships to guard the Saudi oil center, the Eastern Province, during any strike on Syria, an official familiar with that discussion said. The Saudis were surprised when the Americans told them U.S. ships wouldn't be able to fully protect the oil region, the official said.
>
> Disappointed, the Saudis told the U.S. that they were open to alternatives to their long-standing defense partnership, emphasizing that they would look for good weapons at good prices, whatever the source, the official said.
>
> In the second episode, one Western diplomat described Saudi Arabia as eager to be a military partner in what was to have been the U.S.-led military strikes on Syria. As part of that, the Saudis asked to be given the list of military targets for the proposed strikes. The Saudis indicated they never got the information, the diplomat said. The Pentagon declined to comment.
>
> "The Saudis are very upset. They don't know where the Americans want to go," said a senior European diplomat not in Riyadh.

So, in the second anecdote, we have a European diplomat revealing that "the Pentagon" refused to share targeting information about our planned

strikes in Syria. It's a smart decision, mind you, but I wonder whether something specific precipitated that, particularly given the allegations Bandar was engaging in disinformation and worse. Withholding such information from him, for example, would have prevented him from ensuring a few bombing runs led to further involvement.

Then there's the first incident, in which the Saudis were shocked that the US hadn't included protecting its Eastern Province in any war plan for Syria. Again, it's a lot easier to sow a full-blown war in Syria if you know you're protected from Syria's sponsors at home.

But I do think Saudi Arabia's oil industry would have been the most logical countarattack for Syria and its allies, though probably using hacks rather than bombs.

Moreover, this gets to the expectations of the Technical Cooperation Agreement, in which the Saudis keep funneling us dollars and we protect its most vulnerable parts. Certainly, the Saudi threat to bring its weapons dollars elsewhere sure seems like a threat to discontinue it.

Still, this, too, was partly about sharing intelligence.

Has someone decided that the Saudis have been misusing the intelligence we've shared with them?

BANDAR'S HOT AND COLD RUNNING JIHADIS

As a reminder, it is fundraising week Chez Emptywheel. Please help support our work if you can.

In my questioning of the Administration's case on Syria, I have focused on holes within their

own story — inconsistent numbers, claims about chain-of-command even while boasting of a hundred defections, false assurances about the reliability of the rebels. Note, too, Jim's catch about the timing of a rebel advance.

All the while I've been reading the several strands of stories alleging that rebel-tied people, not Assad, caused the attack. There's the story that hacked emails show a recently retired American Colonel assuring his wife that the dead Syrian kids were just for show. There's a new letter from Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (who warned about the Iraq WMD) warning that Syria is a trap.

I'm not confident yet I buy these stories — and besides, there's plenty of evidence that Vladimir Putin is waging as heavy a propaganda battle as the US government, so it could well be Russian propaganda.

But given all this, there's one more item that deserves far more attention. Back in early August, I noted a Reuters report of a meeting between Bandar bin Sultan and Putin, in which Bandar offered Putin a lot of things he couldn't deliver so long as Putin would give up on supporting Bashar al-Assad.

The day of the CW attack, what is clearly Putin's version of the story got published. In addition to it depicting Bandar basically concluding (at the end of July) that "there is no escape from the military option" in Syria, it also alleged that Bandar claimed he could shut down jihadist influence in Syria and suggested he could prevent Chechen terrorists from attacking the Sochi Olympics. Or not, depending on whether Putin cooperated.

> Bandar told Putin, "There are many common values □□and goals that bring us together, most notably the fight against terrorism and extremism all over the world. Russia, the US, the EU and the Saudis agree on promoting and consolidating international peace and

> security. The terrorist threat is growing in light of the phenomena spawned by the Arab Spring. We have lost some regimes. And what we got in return were terrorist experiences, as evidenced by the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the extremist groups in Libya. … As an example, **I can give you a guarantee to protect the Winter Olympics in the city of Sochi on the Black Sea next year. The Chechen groups that threaten the security of the games are controlled by us**, and they will not move in the Syrian territory's direction without coordinating with us. These groups do not scare us. **We use them in the face of the Syrian regime but they will have no role or influence in Syria's political future.**"
>
> Putin thanked King Abdullah for his greetings and Bandar for his exposition, but then he said to Bandar, "We know that you have supported the Chechen terrorist groups for a decade. And that support, which you have frankly talked about just now, is completely incompatible with the common objectives of fighting global terrorism that you mentioned. We are interested in developing friendly relations according to clear and strong principles."

Again, this is clearly Putin's version of the meeting. We should assume it is at least partly propaganda.

However, the allegation that Bandar either implicitly or explicitly threatened the Olympics does very closely resemble a threat Bandar is documented to have made in the past.

Back in 2004, the British Serious Fraud Office started to investigate the Al-Yamamah arms deal under Maggie Thatcher, in which BAE would bribe members of the Saudi royal family to sell arms (as a special side deal, the bribes became a

slush fund to run covert ops). In 2005, BAE started pressuring SFO to drop the investigation in the public interest, at first citing the business BAE would lose if SFO continued the investigation. Then in December 2006, Bandar flew to Britain and threatened Tony Blair that the Saudis would stop counterterrorism cooperation unless SFO dropped the investigation. Within weeks, SFO dropped the investigation.

That threat is documented this way in the paperwork describing the efforts to drop the investigation.

> Similarly [REDACTION] approach to [REDACTION] via the [REDACTION] appears to have been confined to the effect on the Typhoon and Al Yamamah contract. [REDACTION] raises the prospect that Saudi co-operation on counter terrorism and the relationship on Iraq and the wider Middle East will suffer. The Cabinet Secretary has raised the possibility of harm to intelligence gathering, [REDACTION] and to multinational initiative to try to resolve the Israel/Palestine conflict concluding that "if the Saudis are already starting to take such steps in relation to the Typhoon programme, then we must anticipate that they could follow though (sic) [REDACTION] in relation to counter terrorism and the bi-lateral relationship."

But subsequent reporting of the meeting (based an investigation of SFO's decision described the threats as even more explicit predictions of a repeat of the 7/7 Tube attack.

> Saudi Arabia's rulers threatened to make it easier for terrorists to attack London unless corruption investigations into their arms deals were halted, according to court documents revealed yesterday.

> Previously secret files describe how investigators were told they faced "another 7/7" and the loss of "British lives on British streets" if they pressed on with their inquiries and the Saudis carried out their threat to cut off intelligence.

The threat — at least as portrayed — is about withdrawing intelligence and in doing so ensuring the Brits get attacked. It's not — as alleged in the Putin meeting — about controlling terrorists. And maybe that's what Bandar really threatened Putin with, that he would stop sharing intelligence leading up to the Olympics.

Still, the BAE background makes it clear that Bandar does and has made such threats in the past. Which lends credence to the claim that he made some kind of similar threat here.

LOUIS FREEH DEFENDING IRAN-CONTRA TYPE ARMS DEALS ALONG WITH BANDAR

A few details of Louis Freeh's defense of Bandar point more directly at the US President's cooperation with Bandar (and the Saudis) on covert ops.

BANDAR BUSH KICKS THE POODLE

The Guardian reports that Bandar allegedly threatened Tony Blair to force him to halt an investigation into BAE-related bribes of Bandar.

BANDAR AND DOJ

FIVE DATA POINTS ON THE SESSIONS NEWS

Jeff Sessions is almost certainly not going to be prosecuted for perjury. But that doesn’t mean the exposure of his non-disclosure of Russian ties isn’t important.