

Saudis Going South on Iraq

2007-08-01 15:10:04 by Southern

The Bush administration and Saudi Arabia's ruling family have a lot in common, including oil, shared rivals like Iran and a penchant for denial that has allowed both to overlook the Saudis' enabling role in the Sept. 11 attacks. But their recent wrangling over Iraq cannot be denied or papered over with proposals for a big new arms sale. And if these differences are not tackled, there is an increased likelihood that the war's chaos will spread far beyond Iraq's borders.

While Washington hasn't protested publicly, Riyadh is pouring money into Sunni opposition groups and letting Saudis cross the border to join Sunni insurgents fighting the American-backed, Shiite-led government. Washington estimates that nearly half of the 60 to 80 foreign fighters entering Iraq each month come from Saudi Arabia.

So far, neither Washington nor Riyadh is spending any time thinking about containing the chaos that will follow the inevitable American withdrawal. The only good news is that President Bush is sending Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates to Saudi Arabia for what we hope will be a frank discussion.

A failed Iraqi state with Saudi Islamists holed up in Al Qaeda sanctuaries in its western deserts is clearly not in the interests of the Saudi monarchy. But for Ms. Rice and Mr. Gates to have any chance of changing Saudi policies, they will have to go beyond the administration's usual mix of bullying and denial and address legitimate Saudi concerns.

One such concern is Iran, which is bankrolling and training Shiite militias, building a power base in Shiite areas of Iraq and drawing the prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, into its orbit. Iran's expanding influence poses a major threat to Saudi Arabia.

After years of mistaken American policy in Iraq, that threat cannot simply be conjured or blustered away. Whether the Saudis like it or not, and whether Mr. Bush likes it or not, Washington needs to face up to these issues, sit down with Tehran and work out mutually acceptable solutions to these issues that the Saudis can live with as well.

Another concern is the plight of Iraq's Sunni minority under a sectarian Shiite government in league with vindictive Shiite militias. Saudi Arabia and Iraqi Sunnis have to get used to the idea of Shiite majority power. But the Saudis cannot be expected to sit still while the Iraqi Sunnis are driven from their homes, denied decent jobs and treated as second-class citizens by the Iraqi government.

If Washington wants Saudi backing for the Maliki government, Mr. Maliki must earn it by ending sectarianism in the security forces, reforming discriminatory anti-Baathist restrictions and pushing through an equitable oil revenue law.

It is past time for President Bush to acknowledge that the United States has no realistic chance of winning a military victory in Iraq, and that it needs to be urgently preparing to manage the consequences of an American withdrawal. That will require working cooperatively with all of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and Syria. Compared with those, Saudi Arabia should be easy.

[NYTimes](#)

<http://www.southernwolf.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=14>