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A spy who tried to scale Kremlin wall

By M K Bhadrakumar

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When the Central Intelligence Agency's "favorite Saudi prince" - which was how the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz last week described the chief of Saudi intelligence, Prince Bandar bin Sultan - landed in Moscow in his private jet on Wednesday and drove straight to Novo-Ogarevo in the city suburbs to meet President Vladimir Putin at his residence, it didn't turn out to be the "hush-hush" visit that the spy chief is usually accustomed to and would have expected.

The Russian news agency Itar-Tass scrambled to carry a crisp report, quoting the Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying that the Saudi prince and Putin discussed a "broad range of issues in bilateral relations, the situation in the Middle East and North Africa".

Evidently, the Russians didn't want to trigger rumors and speculation at a time when there is a new criticality about the Syrian situation - and Bandar's mystique thrives on rumors. In fact, the same day that Bandar's jet landed in Moscow, Syrian government forces "liberated" the strategic city of Homs, which the opposition fancifully used to call their "revolutionary capital".

With this, the government regained control over the country's central provinces, which are traversed by the two strategic highways linking Damascus respectively with the northern city of Aleppo and the Mediterranean port city of Tartus, where Russian navy maintains a Soviet-era base.

Our man in Riyadh

Bandar is Saudi Arabia's key point person for Syria. Only last weekend King Abdullah named him director-general of the Saudi Intelligence Agency on top of his post as secretary-general of the National Security Council. The appointment has been widely seen as signifying a new phase in the Saudi push for "regime change" in Syria.

By now it is clear that the Obama administration proposes to be involved through the CIA rather than the Pentagon in the Syrian civil war. Obama opted for CIA operations in preference to any direct US military operations as such after being warned by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey that outright intervention in Syria would require "hundreds of aircraft, ships, submarines and other enablers", and would cost "in the billions".

The Americans hold Bandar in high regard as a "can-do person" - almost like one of them and as Ha'aretz put it, "Bandar is considered the CIA's man in Riyadh."

Bandar served as the Saudi ambassador in Washington for 22 years at a stretch and proved invaluable as interlocutor for successive American presidents so much so that he received the protection of the US Secret Service as America's national security asset, something strange in diplomatic history.

To be sure, last weekend's appointment of Bandar as the spy chief signifies that Abdullah has put him on the driving seat to steer the Saudi-US juggernaut that hopes to roll down the road to Damascus, the present road blocks notwithstanding.

After all, Bandar could do an exceptional job in Afghanistan in the 1980s to ensure that the Mujahideen were kept supplied with a steady flow of funds or weapons to bleed the Soviet Red Army, while his brother-in-law, Prince Turki, who held charge of Saudi intelligence, liaised with the dangerous folks who later morphed into the al-Qaeda.

Bandar leads the pack of hardliners within the Saudi regime who shall not settle for anything short of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad stepping down. What brought him to Moscow on Wednesday was obviously Syria.

An eerie similarity

Put plainly, he thought of leaving his name card. Bandar's visit implies a tacit Saudi acknowledgement that Putin's robust Syrian policy is meeting with success.

But then, Bandar has a genuine aversion toward revolutions (in the Arab lands) and he views the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat no less than Iran's rise. He heard somewhere that there could be scope to develop commonality of interests with Moscow, which never quite disguised its own distaste toward the Brothers.

The overarching Saudi agenda is to create whatever misunderstanding possible in the Russian-

Iranian equations by creating a misperception that Moscow may be tempted to follow a "dual track" policy on Syria. But, of course, Bandar's timing was appalling.

The Russians knew Bandar recently held coordination meetings in Washington and Tel Aviv to devise new ways of stepping up the military pressure on the Syrian government forces by arming the rebels - including groups affiliated with al-Qaeda in northern Syria - and to weaken the Hezbollah, whose fighters are helping the Syrian army.

Arguably, Obama's policy has an eerie similarity with the cunning strategy that Jimmy Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski crafted following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan - bleed the Red Army in a covert war bankrolled by the petrodollar sheikhs.

Whereas the Russian focus will be on paving the way for a political track leading to a level playing field in the presidential election due in Syria in 2014, the US-Saudi-Israeli problem with that is, Assad's prospects of winning in that election and ruling Syria with greater legitimacy than ever before are excellent as things stand today.

The fact remains that for a very substantial section of the Syrian people, Assad stands between them and the deluge that is enveloping the Muslim Middle East.

Enter Bandar. The forte of the Saudi prince lies in finessing Salafist fighters as instruments of regional policy, something that fits in with the broader US's geo-strategies as well in the so-called Greater Middle East (including Afghanistan and Central Asia).

The Saudi-backed coup in Egypt reinforces the US-Saudi axis in Syria. The interim government in Cairo has reverted to the full-throttle collaboration with the Israeli security establishment characteristic of the Hosni Mubarak era, which is something that pleases Washington. Most important, Riyadh and Cairo have given a big hand to kick-starting the stalled Middle East peace talks, which is a significant contribution to the US's desperate need to be seen as a benevolent mediator.

Over and above, the sidelining of Qatar has removed a maverick while the puncturing of Turkey's pretensions as the leader of the Arab people ensures that the US-Saudi axis has a better control over the conduct of the covert war in Syria.

A slap in the face

Most certainly, Bandar's intention was to fathom the mood in Moscow at a juncture when US-Russia ties are poised to take a tumble over the case of the ex-CIA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Simply put, there is a high probability of the Syrian conflict taking a new geopolitical dimension by locking in big power rivalry. The influential US senator John McCain said Thursday that Moscow's decision on Snowden is "a slap in the face of all Americans". He said in a statement, Now is the time to fundamentally rethink our relationship with Putin's Russia. We need to deal with the Russia that is, not the Russia we might wish for. We cannot allow today's action [on

Snowden] by Putin to stand without serious repercussions. Today's action by Putin's Russia should finally strip away the illusions that many Americans have had about Russia in the past few years. We have long needed to take a more realistic approach to our relations with Russia, and I hope today we finally start.

Meanwhile, Russian media reported intercepts of message addressed to "jihadists" from North Caucasus to look to join the holy war in Russia rather than proceed to Syria, and to "prepare for the so-called Olympics Games in Sochi [February 2014]."

The Kremlin would know from the "Afghan jihad" that Bandar is a dangerous customer. The Itar-Tass did a fine work of photo journalism with the picture of the portly figure of Bandar seated on a gilded chair lost in thoughts, presumably in an ante-room at Novo-Ogarevo - left to himself.