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## The Saudi Royals — Unchained

By Joe Lauria

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With President Obama afraid of upsetting the Saudis anymore after the Iran-nuclear deal, he has given them pretty much a free hand to bomb and blockade Yemen. Meanwhile, the Saudi royals are displaying their contempt for the United Nations and its Yemen peace efforts, Joe Lauria reports.

Saudi Arabia's relations with the United Nations have hit rock bottom after a series of incidents that has left a humbled Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon furious with Riyadh, two U.N. officials close to the U.N. chief have told me.

The relationship matters because only the United Nations has the reputation of neutrality necessary to forge a power-sharing deal that can finally end the conflict in Yemen.

Ban was cool to the Saudi-led operation from the start. On the first day of bombing on March 26 he called on countries to “refrain from external interference” which seeks to “foment conflict and instability.” Since then the Saudis have shown near total disregard for Ban and the U.N.'s role in the conflict.

–Ban was upset that the Saudis' military operation in Yemen derailed U.N.-brokered talks in March.

–He believes he was lied to by the Saudis when they didn't deliver on a promise of aid money to the U.N.

–The Saudis have blockaded ports bringing the U.N. to the verge of declaring a famine in Yemen.

–Ban was apoplectic that Riyadh forced a postponement in June of U.N.-led talks in Geneva; and then later broke two promises to Ban of a humanitarian truce.

–The U.N. made matters worse by ignoring Saudi conditions and declaring an unconditional truce in early July anyway, which never took hold.

–The Saudis unilaterally announced a humanitarian pause at the end of July bypassing the U.N., which also quickly fell apart.

–The Saudi offensive in August aimed at advancing on the capital of Sana'a has pushed a UN-brokered negotiated settlement even further off the table.

### **Saudi Impunity**

Saudi leaders seem confident there are no consequences for repeatedly slighting Ban: he'll just take it and not say a word publicly. Ban believes in "quiet diplomacy." He's not known for convincing displays of emotion. His attempts at outrage over atrocities and injustices fall flat.

He told me once in an interview he screams at his staff, as if to show he's no pushover. But that's taking it out on his inferiors. Unlike Dag Hammarskjöld, who took on both Cold War powers (and may have cost him his life), and Kofi Annan, who dared criticize Washington over Iraq, Ban mostly remains mute in the face of superior power.

Behind the scenes is a different matter. Ban is palpably "angry" with the Saudis, as one UN official, who's met with him recently, put it, and "frustrated," said another official close to Ban.

On the first day of the Saudi aerial assault, Ban declared: "Despite escalation, negotiations remain the only option." He was echoing his then envoy Jamal Benomar, who maintains that the destruction and death will end only with a U.N.-brokered deal that includes the Houthis. Right now the Saudis are making a mockery of that notion, and Ban's taking it hard.

Benomar had worked with the Yemeni parties for four years. He told me they were close to a power-sharing deal when the start of Saudi bombing ended the talks. The outstanding issue was the power of the presidency. The Saudis wouldn't pressure Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi to take a reduced role, which Benomar says the Houthis would have accepted. They were ready to pull their militia out of Sana'a, to be replaced by a national unity force the U.N. had prepared for deployment, he says.

### **Ban's New Envoy**

Saudi-owned media called Benomar the “Houthi envoy” because the deal he was brokering would’ve given 20 percent of cabinet and parliament seats to the Houthis even though they had taken over the capital and at the time were headed towards Aden.

Benomar quit on April 16 and Mauritanian diplomat Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed took over. “The Secretary-General was not happy that he had to pull Cheikh Ahmed out of his position of head of the emergency ebola response,” a U.N. official told me.

Two days after Benomar resigned, the Saudis responded to a U.N. appeal for humanitarian aid, pledging \$274 million. It’s been suggested this was a quid-pro-quo to dump Benomar for Cheikh Ahmed. That’s been denied by U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq.

But Ban understood the Saudi money would go directly to the U.N.’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA). He became apoplectic when he learned the Saudis are instead keeping it in the King Salman Foundation, a U.N. official told me.

“We want to make sure that aid goes to all people in need,” another U.N. official said, fearing the Saudis will only distribute it to pro-government areas. Talks are continuing with the Saudis to convince them to let the U.N. control the money, he said, as well as to open ports to humanitarian aid, but so far to no avail. The Saudi blockade, leading to a potentially massive human crisis, has riled Ban, an official said. OCHA says about 80 percent of Yemen’s 24 million people need aid.

On May 8, the Saudis snubbed the U.N. again, agreeing to a five-day humanitarian truce with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Paris without U.N. input. But the pause was marred by continued bombing and fighting by both sides.

The Saudis rebuffed their preferred man, Cheikh Ahmed, when he tried to revive the U.N.-led negotiations in a neutral site. They instead held talks on May 18-19 in Riyadh, where they knew the Houthis would never come. Perhaps that was the point.

Ban didn’t go either. He sent Cheikh Ahmed. Ban’s spokesman virtually ignored the ill-fated conference, merely “taking note” of it. He stressed that all parties must take part in a U.N.-brokered, Yemeni-led process.

### **Ban Was ‘Humiliated’**

Following the failed Riyadh conference, Cheikh Ahmed thought he had the parties’ agreement to meet in Geneva without pre-conditions at the end of May. But the Saudis yanked the carpet from under Ban, insisting on the pre-condition of implementing an April Security Council resolution that called for Hadi’s restoration and Houthi withdrawal from its territorial gains.

The Secretary-General had to postpone the announced meeting four days before it was to begin. “He was humiliated by the Saudis when they did this,” a high-ranking U.N. official told me. “He was really furious.”

After the Americans applied pressure, meeting separately with Houthi leaders in Oman on May 31, the Saudis finally agreed to indirect Geneva talks. Ban flew to the Swiss city to open the conference on June 15, and met with the Saudi and Hadi delegations. But where were the Houthis?

Their plane was grounded in Djibouti for eight hours because Egypt refused to open its airspace. A senior diplomat familiar with Yemen, told me Egypt, dependent on Saudi money, kept the Houthis grounded “on instructions” from Riyadh, preventing them from meeting Ban.

The warring parties never met directly, with Cheikh Ahmed only seeing the Houthis in their hotel, where they later held a press conference on June 19 that was disrupted by protestors and devolved into a fistfight on camera.

“Geneva was a fiasco,” a U.N. official said.

### **A Ramadan Ceasefire?**

In Geneva Ban called for a Ramadan ceasefire, backed by the U.S. and European Union, to allow aid into an increasingly desperate country.

On July 8, Hadi wrote a letter to Ban, that has never been released, but which I have seen, that clearly outlines the Hadi/Saudi conditions for such a cease-fire.

The Houthis had to withdraw from Aden, Taiz, Mareb and Shabwa provinces as an initial step. The truce would begin in those provinces once withdrawal was complete. The ceasefire would have gradually been extended to other Yemeni provinces after Houthi withdrawal from those areas. All political prisoners and “arbitrarily detained individuals” had to be released.

If the Houthis made any military move anywhere during the truce, the Saudis could “respond immediately and without prior notice.” The Saudi-led coalition would maintain its air and sea blockades to prevent weapons from getting to the Houthis.

But the U.N. wanted an *unconditional* truce. Despite these very clear conditions, U.N. headquarters was split on whether to announce an *unconditional* truce anyway. The faction that did win: A truce without conditions was announced by Ban’s spokesman Stephane Dujarric on July 9, who said Hadi had accepted the truce and that Ban had “received assurances” from all sides. Ban’s people say Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir promised Ban by telephone that the cease-fire would begin.

But a senior diplomat whom I spoke to was immensely skeptical. “The [U.N.] says [Hadi and the Saudis] accepted the truce, but they accepted with conditions,” he said. “So this whole thing is misleading. They are giving the impression that something is happening, but this will backfire.”

When the truce never happened, the Saudis incredibly said that Hadi, who is in exile in a Riyadh palace, never told them about it. That was the last straw for the Saudis and U.N. “ceasefires.”

## **U.N. Sidelined**

On July 25, the Saudis tried calling for a unilateral truce bypassing the U.N. altogether. The Houthis didn't agree because the U.N. wasn't involved, and the whole thing again collapsed. The United Nations has been effectively sidelined and the fighting has intensified, especially around Aden, which pro-Hadi forces captured last month.

Saudi Arabia has shown contempt for the U.N. before. In 2013, the Kingdom was elected to a coveted, two-year, non-permanent seat on the Security Council after an expensive lobbying campaign. But when the U.S. failed to bomb Syria after the August 2013 chemical attack in Damascus and instead began talking a nuclear deal with the Iranians, the Saudis abruptly renounced the seat in a fit of pique that seemed only to spite itself. It was a sign of a new Saudi independence in international affairs.

“The Saudis are not even listening to the Americans anymore,” a U.N. official said, let alone the U.N. “The Americans don't have access to [Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince] Mohammed bin Salman, who is calling the shots. He's young and doesn't care about the Americans.” Prince Mohammed this summer visited St. Petersburg, and concluded a \$10 billion Saudi investment with Russia, in spite of American-led sanctions against Moscow.

Saudi Arabia thinks it can win militarily in Yemen and ignore the U.N. until it's time for the clean-up, but ultimately Riyadh “will need the U.N. to put together a power-sharing deal, that will have to include the Houthis,” as one U.N. official told me.

Clearly that day hasn't arrived yet. And in the meantime 80 percent of Yemenis need help to survive and Ban Ki-moon privately stewes about it.