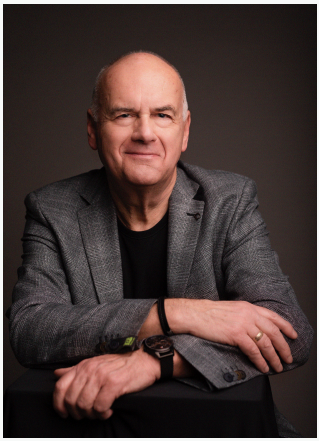
WALKA WYWIADÓW, TERRORYŚCI I SPISEK
ZAGRAŻAJĄCY ŚWIATOWEMU RYNKOWI ROPY...

AGENT Z RIJADU

Robert Michniewicz

The Riyadh Agent

Synopsis, Bio & Excerpts



Robert Michniewicz

About the author

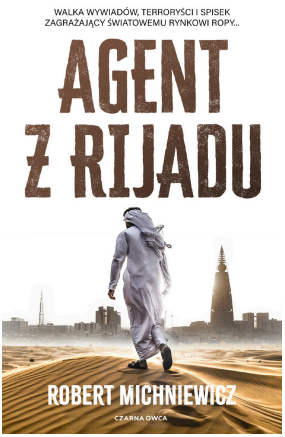
Robert Michniewicz is a former officer of the Polish intelligence service. He graduated from the Faculty of Law and Administration at the University of Warsaw and completed postgraduate studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences.

In 1984, he completed his training at the Intelligence Training Centre with distinction. **He went on to serve in Polish intelligence for 23 years, including 11 years in foreign postings.** His operational work took him to the Middle East, the Americas, and Europe. He retired in 2006 with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

In his spare time, he enjoys reading thrillers and maritime literature, travelling, and staying active through sport.

The Riyadh Agent
Robert Michniewicz

Espionage



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Tension and intrigue in the shadow of global power struggles!

A wave of terrorist attacks rocks Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. Claimed by an alleged Al-Qaeda cell, the assaults hide a far more dangerous conspiracy. Beneath the surface, a secret plot reaches deep into the inner circles of the Saudi royal family. Meanwhile, Iranian and Russian intelligence agencies form a covert alliance to destabilise the global oil market — a move with sweeping global consequences.

Amid the chaos, a Russian diplomat approaches Polish intelligence officer Aleks Niwiński with an offer of risky cooperation. Tasked with uncovering the truth, Niwiński finds himself drawn into a tangled web of secrets involving the Polish ambassador's suspicious behaviour, the unexplained disappearance of his wife, and the looming threat of a leak of sensitive Polish state information.

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When the first shots resounded near the gate, Aleks glanced towards it and shouted, 'Ambassador, head down and run!' Seeing his boss hesitate, Aleks grabbed his arm and yanked it to make him follow. They ran towards the Ministry building as fast as they could.

The Riyadh Agent
Synopsis by Robert Michniewicz, translated by Kasia Beresford

Riyadh, April 2022. A Saudi Minister, who is a member of the Al-Saud royal family, is killed in a terrorist attack just outside the headquarters of the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claims responsibility for the attack, but in fact it was carried out by an unknown radical Shiite group called Al-thar minn Qatif. The Polish ambassador, **Konrad Zalewski**, and a Polish intelligence officer, **Aleksander Niwiński**, are injured in the attack. Just beforehand, Niwiński had spotted the Iranian diplomat, **Farzad Hamseh**, and also an Arab man behaving suspiciously, near the MOI building. He communicates his observations to the investigating officer, major **Faris Al-Ghazi** from the Presidency of State Security (PSS). The PSS embarks on an energetic hunt for the terrorists, but it soon becomes apparent that the powers that be at the MOI do not want the investigation to make progress.

Aleks Niwiński becomes aware of secretive contact between the Polish ambassador and **Oleg Sokolov**, the chief of station of the Russian intelligence service (SVR). The Polish ambassador's wife is away on an extended visit to Russia and her relative, **Alina Yegorova**, is living in the ambassador's residence. Alina works in the Polish embassy as a volunteer and Aleks suspects she may have links to the Russian intelligence services. Niwiński soon discovers that the ambassador's wife is unable to leave Russia until Zalewski agrees to collaborate with the Russian intelligence services.

Al-thar minn Qatif fighters prepare to assassinate the Mayor of Riyadh using information gained from a Saudi MOI official who appears to want revenge on his superiors. The terrorist attack fails and several members of the terrorist cell are killed. The new leader of the cell suspects that they were betrayed by their MOI source and seeks revenge. He sends some of his fighters to Riyadh and they soon determine that the duplicitous source was colonel Abdullah bin Abdulrahman, a high-ranking official in the MOI.

Niwiński regularly attends social events at a farm (on the outskirts of Riyadh) owned by Dr Khalid, the brother of colonel Abdullah and an advisor to the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Aleks happens to notice that Oleg Sokolov, also a guest at the farm, secretly receives an envelope from his host. He suspects Dr Khalid of collaboration with the Russian intelligence services.

Sokolov orders his subordinate, Volodymyr Ponomarenko, to gather intelligence about Niwiński. Ponomarenko sets about his task, however, he becomes increasingly frustrated by the course of the war between Russia and Ukraine; the area where he was brought up is in the war zone. Then Ponomarenko receives news that two of his cousins were raped by Russian soldiers and his father and uncle murdered by them. These events arouse hatred of Russia in Ponomarenko, a feeling fuelled by evidence that Sokolov is having an affair with his wife. Ponomarenko decides to betray Russia in revenge. He contacts Niwiński and offers to hand over classified information to the Polish intelligence services.

Niwiński monitors a meeting between Sokolov and Farzad Hamseh, the chief of station of the Iranian intelligence service (VAJA) and discovers the two intelligence services formed a clandestine alliance with the aim of destabilising the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and thereby the world crude oil market. He passes this information on to the CIA's chief of station.

Niwiński sees that Sokolov is dramatically escalating the pressure on ambassador Zalewski, so he decides to talk heart-to-heart with Zalewski. The ambassador admits he is being blackmailed by the Russians. During a visit to Russia, he was drugged and posed having sexual contact with children. In an attempt to recruit the ambassador, who was due to take up an influential position in the Chancellery of the President of the Polish Republic in the near future, the Russians set-up his wife to believe she had to travel to Russia and then prevented her from returning to Saudi Arabia. Aleks Niwiński works out a plan to frustrate the Russians' operations. He stages the ambassador having a heart attack in order to delay a crucial meeting between Zalewski and Sokolov. In the meantime the Polish secret services evacuate Zalewski's wife from Russia. With the help of the CIA, Niwiński records a conversation during which the SVR chief of station hands over funds for terrorist operations to a representative of the Iranian intelligence services. He hears details about a planned rocket attack on the oil refinery in Abquaik, the largest refinery in Saudi Arabia.

The Americans attack and destroy the terrorist base in Yemen from which the drones carrying rockets to attack Abquaik were about to be launched.

A huge sandstorm is approaching Riyadh. Niwiński, Sokolov and colonel Abdullah all arrive at the farm outside Riyadh to join a social gathering for foreigners. During this party, CNN and Poland's TVN24, transmit a special broadcast exposing the conspiracy between the Iranian and Russian intelligence services to support terrorist attacks, including the planned attack on the oil refinery. The broadcast includes footage of conversations between Sokolov and Hamseh, and the news spreads to television

networks worldwide. At the same time Al-thar minn Qatif fighters, who had followed colonel Abdullah there, attack the farm. During a brutal interrogation colonel Abdullah admits that he had been acting on the instructions of prince Ahmad Al-Saud, the Deputy Minister of Interior, who wanted vengeance on the royal family for the past disgrace of his father prince Saud. A battle ensues between the terrorist fighters and soldiers from the security forces.

Sokolov, who has been utterly disgraced, seeks revenge on Niwiński. He leaves the farm immediately after the broadcast with Alina Yegorova, the Russian agent who was waiting in his car. Sokolov gets his driver to drug Alina and murder her inside Niwiński's apartment to try and frame Aleks for her murder.

The Saudi government break off diplomatic ties with Iran and expel Sokolov and Hamseh. They arrest prince Ahmad and members of his family. The SVR chiefs appoint Ponomarenko as chief of station for the Russian intelligence services in Saudi Arabia.

Kasia Beresford is a Polish-to-English translator and interpreter. She studied French, Russian, and Polish at Cambridge University. After a London-based career in business, she moved to Manchester and returned to her roots by working with languages.

The Riyadh Agent
by Robert Michniewicz
translated from the Polish by Kasia Beresford

This sample consists of two excerpts. The first one is a continuous passage starting at the beginning of the book.

CHAPTER 1

RIYADH, APRIL 2022

A black Mercedes with diplomatic plates was driving slowly along King Fahd Road, a motorway which crosses the capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from north to south. A traffic jam was building up, making it hard to drive fast. The time for *zuhr*, the midday prayer, was approaching, but the Quran permits believers who are travelling to be absent from mosque. Many of Riyadh's four and a half million inhabitants were taking advantage of this to make the journey home. Blazing heat of over forty degrees was having a soporific effect on Saudis longing for their lunch and an afternoon siesta.

The car took the exit onto King Saud Road and headed towards the Saudi Ministry of Interior building, which was shaped like a flying saucer.

'Faleel, slow down please. We still have quite a while until our meeting,' said ambassador Konrad Zalewski, adjusting his elegant silk tie, appropriate attire for a visit to a member of the royal family.

'Ambassador, perhaps it would be advisable to arrive a little early,' suggested counsellor Aleksander Niwiński. 'I try to do that as a rule to allow for unforeseen circumstances and so avoid being late.'

'I often have a different take to you, Mr Niwiński, but perhaps in this instance you're right. After all, we should be the ones waiting for the Minister rather than the other way round. Faleel, speed up please.'

The Pakistani chauffeur bowed politely, as was his custom; however, instead of accelerating, he had to slow down as he was turning off Tariq al-Malik into Olaya Street. The gate on this side was the recommended entry route for official visits to the MOI by the diplomatic corps. The traffic on this wide street was very heavy and the sides of the road were tightly packed with parked cars.

None of them could have foreseen the drama that fate had in store for them.

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A sand-coloured Toyota Land Cruiser, a common sight in the capital of Saudi Arabia, stood near the kerb a hundred and fifty metres away from the MOI gates. Vehicles used by the Saudi armed forces and security services were generally sand-coloured. A young Arab man sitting inside the car answered his phone.

'*Salam alaikum*,' was the greeting he heard.

'Alaikum salam,' he answered.

'Delivery on its way. The cargo will arrive on time.'

'*Inshallah*,' he said, and hung up.

As agreed, he rang the number labelled *Mard Mohem* on his mobile and spoke only three words, 'Any time now.'

He went back to observing the entry gates of the Ministry of Interior. He was pleased that his car was far enough away from the Ministry complex to escape the attention of the numerous patrols. It was divine providence that he had found this space in a city where even the side roads were packed with cars at all hours of the day.

All set. Inshallah, he thought.

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The Mercedes was gliding serenely towards the Ministry building. Looking through the side window, Niwiński spotted the face of the Iranian counsellor, Farzad Hamseh, in a car pulled up beside the other parked vehicles. The car had caught his attention because it wasn't parked by the kerb, just stopped in a traffic lane. In surprise he looked back at the diplomat's car and checked that he wasn't mistaken. He had met the Iranian recently when making an introductory courtesy call. *He must also have had a meeting at the MOI*, Niwiński thought. He had the impression that he'd seen another person sitting beside Hamseh, possibly an Arab man, but couldn't be sure.

'That was definitely Farzad Hamseh,' he muttered.

'Who? What are you talking about?' asked the ambassador.

'We've just passed the Iranian embassy counsellor's car. Have you met him yet? Why would he have parked his car on the street instead of in the Ministry's car park?'

Zalewski gave him a condescending look.

'Heads of mission don't meet counsellors unless it's essential. Please remember that. Certain protocols apply in diplomacy. I'd advise you to follow them, although I'm sure you're aiming for the widest possible circle of contacts. You might easily blow your cover that way. Polish diplomats generally stay in the embassy and avoid meetings other than formal receptions.'

Aleks didn't reply. He went back to looking through the window. He spotted an Arab sitting in a sand-coloured Toyota Land Cruiser parked by the kerb. The man pushed the sides of his ghutra away from his face. Niwiński noticed that the man was leaning forward over the steering wheel and gazing intently towards the MOI headquarters. He had a mobile phone in his hand. He must have felt the Pole's gaze because he suddenly glanced at him. Their eye contact lasted for perhaps a second, then the Arab went back to observing what was happening in front of his car.

Interesting, thought Aleks, *everyone is rushing home for lunch and a siesta, yet this guy is admiring the street scenery. Though perhaps he's waiting for his boss who's inside the Ministry. The Toyota is the right colour for it to belong to the Saudi armed forces. But then why are there no markings on the vehicle doors? I must be overdoing it, first I see the Iranian counsellor, now I'm wondering about some unknown Arab. I'm going on an official visit and I ought to focus on that, whereas I seem to have eyes on stalks as if I were checking whether I was being tailed.*

The embassy car braked just before the concrete chicanes of the control zone in front of the entrance to the Ministry car park. Two armoured vehicles stood just behind a barrier. The hostile expressions of the soldiers on guard duty and the disagreeable sight of several automatic-gun barrels aimed at approaching vehicles were meant to deter potential assailants.

'When I see Saudi soldiers with their fingers fixed to the triggers of their machine guns, I'm always worried that they might suddenly start shooting by accident,' said Niwiński, intently watching the guards approaching their car from both sides.

Faleel opened his window and held out diplomatic ID for all the people in the car. In response to the initial snarl of one of the soldiers, he meekly explained that he was bringing the ambassador and counsellor for an audience with the minister. Once the guard received the go-ahead from his superior, who was observing from a

wooden booth by the gate, he gave the chauffeur permission to enter with a gracious wave of his hand.

Once the barrier was up, the Mercedes moved forward and after it was lowered again and the steel gate opened, the car slowly drove into the grounds of the Ministry. Another guard indicated that they should stop in the middle of the car park.

'Your wish has been fulfilled, Mr Niwiński, we are early,' said ambassador Zalewski as he opened the car door. A rush of blazing hot air entered the car. The contrast between the air-conditioned coolness of the car and the searing heat of the sun in the Ministry's courtyard was stark. 'I wonder when our host will turn up. He's known for having a very relaxed approach to the start times of meetings,' said the Ambassador in a jovial manner.

Niwiński knew that the ambassador had excellent contacts in the diplomatic corps and, thanks to these, had amassed a lot of information about the members of the royal family.

'We must make sure we get time to discuss the visit of our Minister for Internal Affairs to Riyadh,' said the ambassador. 'The Saudi MFA has officially confirmed the invitation so what we have to do now is gain the approval of the prince and find out who will be in charge of the preparations on their side.'

Both diplomats straightened their jackets and, in the glare of the sun, headed towards the entrance of the building. At that moment they heard police sirens getting ever closer to them. Niwiński glanced towards the gate which was swinging open. He saw a large American SUV with armed defence personnel standing in front of the gate and, behind the SUV, a black Mercedes S-Class, and the other cars in the Minister's motorcade.

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The Arab sitting in the sand-coloured Toyota felt a surge of rising tension as he watched the motorcade driving up to the gate.

Where are they? he thought. *They should be here now. They'll miss the best moment. Inshallah.*

At that moment a small white sedan car driving past the gates of the Ministry along with other traffic suddenly braked and machine-pistol barrels appeared in the open windows. Ferocious firing ensued — aimed at the entrance gate and the motorcade waiting to enter the grounds of the MOI. The series of bullets hit several of the guards straightaway and then the last cars in the Minister's security escort. As the previously drowsy soldiers sitting by the automatic guns and the commandos inside the security vehicles reached for their weapons a white van screeched to a halt next to the ministerial motorcade. At the same time the sedan car moved off with its occupants still shooting continuously and drawing the attention of the security personnel. The soldiers focused their machine-gun fire on the departing car. At that point no one was paying any attention to the van.

When the first shots resounded near the gate, Aleks glanced towards it and shouted, 'Ambassador, head down and run!' Seeing his boss hesitate, Aleks grabbed his arm and yanked it to make him follow. They ran towards the Ministry building as fast as they could. They had to find cover away from the bullets!

CHAPTER 2

THREE WEEKS EARLIER

The Swiss Airlines twin-engine Airbus A330-300 began the landing approach to Riyadh. Inquisitive as ever, Niwiński peered out through a window. Dusk was slowly falling but he could still make out the empty vastness of the desert below. It seemed endless. He had never visited this part of the world or seen such an ocean of sand. The flight from Zurich had been uneventful as had his earlier morning flight from Warsaw to Zurich with LOT Polish Airlines. He had put the falling snow and slush on the streets out of his mind as soon as he was in the taxi taking him to the airport at Okęcie. The Poles had a saying about the variability of the weather in March, but this year March had just been wintry.

After take-off from Zurich, he had enjoyed gazing at the sunlit Alpine panorama with a glass of champagne in his hand, a treat he couldn't resist when starting a new mission. He would have died of boredom during the six remaining hours of the flight if it hadn't been for the hot meal, coffee, and another glass of champagne. Unfortunately, he was one of those travellers who couldn't manage to fall asleep on any mode of transport and definitely not when flying nine-and-a-half thousand metres above the ground. What had really occupied him were thoughts about the tasks he had to accomplish in Saudi Arabia. An intelligence mission abroad wasn't anything special for him; after all he had two posts in the bag and, in both, his role had been liaison between the local and Polish secret services. This time, however, was supposed to be different, at least that was what colonel Aleksander Zieliński, the deputy chief of the Intelligence Agency, had

told him. During a meeting in which colonel Stanisław Krauze, recently appointed Head of the Operational Department, had also participated, Niwiński was given the following significant instructions.

'You are to initiate collaboration with the Saudi services on our behalf,' stated Zieliński. 'Primarily with their intelligence services which have good insights into the whole region and are working vigorously on the Iranian issue. Build up contacts and take into consideration that, sooner or later, you will also be travelling to other countries in the Gulf with which we are starting to collaborate. Those are your tasks as the liaison officer, but you have others too.'

'We are very interested in what the Russians are up to in Saudi Arabia, in the broadest possible sense,' added colonel Krauze. 'The most important thing is to try and establish contact with someone from their station. A further goal is to monitor Iranian activities, in particular those of their intelligence services, and try and verify whether the Iranians are working with local Russian intelligence officers.'

Colonel Krauze fell silent and Niwiński assumed this was the end of his briefing; these instructions had already been officially included in his objectives. But there were further important matters to come.

'We're assuming that your job in Saudi Arabia won't last particularly long,' said colonel Zieliński.

'How come?' Aleks didn't hide his astonishment. 'I thought I was to spend a whole rotation in Riyadh — four years. I've planned operations for that length of time.'

A Saudi minister is assassinated in the attack described in Chapter 1. The same terrorist cell makes an attempt on the life of another Saudi prince just outside the Polish ambassador's residence in Riyadh, but Niwiński helps foil the attack.

Aleks Niwiński has listened in to a call between a Russian intelligence officer, Oleg Sokolov, and an Iranian diplomat, Farzad Hamseh, during which they arrange to play tennis together. Aleks decides to check it out.

CHAPTER 42

That Friday afternoon the weather in Riyadh wasn't conducive to intense physical exercise. It was certainly cooler than on the previous few days but, by early afternoon, the thermometer showed thirty-nine degrees in the shade. The cloudless sky allowed the sun to shine in all its glory and heat up the open spaces of the hotel to almost fifty degrees.

Having visited a few times previously, Aleks was very familiar with the extensive grounds of the DAMAC Towers Riyadh hotel. Despite that, he arrived almost an hour early. He parked his Mazda in a car park far away from the main building and therefore unpopular with the hotel's guests. He walked back to the main car park to check whether either of the persons of interest had already turned up. As he expected, he couldn't spot any cars with diplomatic plates. He sauntered through the hotel gardens towards the leisure complex. He walked round three artificially surfaced courts; only one of them was occupied — by two Englishmen with lobster tans. Aleks was very concerned by what he saw. Clearly his heart didn't go out to the sweaty sons of Albion frantically chasing yellow tennis balls. What worried him was the openness of the space around the sports facilities and the lack of any good spot for him to eavesdrop on the diplomats. He

couldn't just sit on the bench by the court and cheer them on! He was forced to carry on searching. Aleks didn't find anywhere suitable on the hotel side of the courts. He walked over to the other side and found a large swimming pool belonging to the hotel. It was screened by a row of tall palm trees and a hedge. There was a cafe where guests using the pool could buy snacks and drinks. It was a single-storey building, and on its roof there was a small terrace shaded by a few umbrellas. The waiters bowed in greeting as Aleks headed upstairs. All the tables were vacant. He walked up to the railings on the side facing the tennis courts. He could see all three of them clearly between the palm trees. At a rough estimate the distance to the courts was under eighty metres. *An ideal spot*, he decided.

He sat down at a table and ordered a large lemonade. Then he opened the book he had brought with him to justify his solitary afternoon. He saw that while he was sitting down he wouldn't be very noticeable from the tennis courts. He was screened by the railings running around the terrace and by the palm trees. He pulled out his surveillance equipment. One of the English players had just stopped at the net, panting from exertion. Aleks could hear every breath he drew as clearly as if standing right next to the man. *Splendid. And better still if Hamseh and Sokolov don't limit themselves to physical exercise and puffing from exhaustion*, he thought.

Just before four o'clock the waiter brought him a second frosted glass of lemonade. A short while later, Oleg Sokolov appeared on the court. A careful observer would notice that the Russian hadn't bothered with branded sportswear. His t-shirt, shorts, and footwear had seen better days and seemed more suited to jogging than to tennis — certainly not tennis on an exclusive hotel's courts. He started warming up straightaway; his warm-up was like a start-of-the-day exercise routine. A few minutes later Hamseh arrived. In contrast, he appeared in a dark blue Head outfit which was currently all the rage. Niwiński whistled he was so impressed, although no doubt the Iranian would have been sharply criticised in his own country for buying sports outfits from an American company. The tennis players greeted

each other in a guarded manner. They ordered drinks and exchanged niceties about the beautiful weather. Eventually they began to play. Hamseh, who played a classic even game, did much worse than the Russian, who was less stylish, but made up for any deficiencies by his speed and ferocity. After a fifteen-minute knock-up, they started a proper game. They both had ups and downs in the rallies, but the ruthlessness of Sokolov's game gave him the upper hand. Their observer on the cafe terrace eventually noted a result of six–four, six–two to Oleg. He was getting slightly anxious that he might wait in vain for something of interest. So far grunts, curses, winning cries and groans over losses were all he had heard through his earphones.

At the end of the match the players shook hands. Their faces were so sweaty and flushed from exertion that it was hard to detect their moods.

'Congratulations,' said Hamseh in a croaky voice.

'I've done better, although that was quite some years back.'

They sat on the bench. Both reached for their towels and started to dry their faces.

'You don't seem very interested in our enterprise recently,' said the Iranian glancing at Sokolov.

'You know you can count on me, but you were the one organising the people for the job, so what was there for me to do?'

'You mentioned earlier that the Polish ambassador was a contact. Perhaps if you'd made more of an effort the last operation would have succeeded.'

'That's a bit of an escalation, my friend and ally. You live in the Diplomatic Quarter so you could easily have taken a better look at the surroundings of the Polish ambassador's residence. I'm sure you were at the reception, so you had the opportunity to act. You're fully aware that my country is currently out of favour and, even if I had tried my utmost, the Pole would never have told me anything about the security arrangements at his residence. I doubt he even knew much about them anyway. In my opinion security issues are controlled by

Aleksander Niwiński, a man I'm sure you know. Yasenevo has confirmed that he's from their intelligence service.'

'That's not news. I know that Niwiński is their liaison officer and is in contact with people from GIP and other services' representatives. But that's besides the point. We were supposed to cooperate and put the boot in the Saudis, but I haven't seen much input from your side.'

'I'm ready. Just tell me how I can help,' replied Sokolov.

'Instead of beating around the bush why don't you just tell me whether you're holding back on your own initiative or whether you're putting the brakes on participation in our arrangement on Moscow's orders?'

'Listen, Farzad, we're still keen for the price of oil to be as high as possible. That hasn't changed since last year when we came to an understanding. You're happy when the price exceeds a hundred dollars a barrel. It's not so rosy for us. Circumstances have changed. Western sanctions have substantially restricted our oil exports. We now operate mainly in China, other Asian, and African countries and sanctions have affected the price we can command. You get over a hundred dollars, we get less than half of that. And no terrorist operation is going to change that. Besides, we need assistance with military supplies and hence we're taking a softer approach to the Saudi Kingdom's rulers, aiming for good relations with them. I'm being honest with you.'

'I'll pass that on to Teheran, but my bosses will not be happy. Our interests seem to be diverging. We still wish to weaken the Saudi regime and will do everything in our power to achieve that. With you, or without you,' replied Hamseh.

'My friend, our friendship and cooperation still stand, but we need to limit our operations temporarily.'

'You can't limit anything because you haven't contributed anything yet.'

'Don't exaggerate,' protested Sokolov. 'We gave you more than two hundred thousand dollars for your amateur warriors.'

‘Don’t insult my Shiite brothers. Without them, the price of crude would still be at sixty dollars. You too make money thanks to their actions.’

‘Now you’re talking nonsense again,’ said the Russian indignantly. ‘The price of oil has stayed above a hundred dollars because of our attack on Ukraine and will stay at that level for the months ahead even if your brave fighters hang up their weapons. But let’s not get worked up. We don’t have any reason to argue,’ he said, trying to ease the friction. ‘I have Moscow’s agreement to finance further attacks. Just let me know when and where to deliver the cash.’

‘Teheran and my HQ aren’t satisfied with our collaboration.’ The Iranian’s tone of voice was getting steelier. ‘I’ve been instructed to tell you that if you want any assistance from us in the form of military supplies then you need to deliver on collaboration in this region, including in Saudi Arabia. Pass that on to your bosses. If they don’t believe you, they can ask Tehran and they’ll get the same answer.’

‘Farzad, we will cooperate. It’s just that undermining the Saudis’ power is particularly inconvenient for us right now. I’ve told you, haven’t I, that the cash is ready for you.’

‘I’ve said what I’ve got to say, and I hope your side takes it seriously,’ replied Hamseh. ‘As far as the cash goes, we need more than previously because we’re considering a direct attack on the infrastructure of the Saudi oil industry. Something like Abqaiq in 2019.’

‘The Americans won’t let it go a second time. Take care. But I’ll pass the information on to Moscow.’

‘Tell them we expect at least a million dollars to enable an operation on that scale.’

Sokolov stared at the Iranian in shock. Eventually he turned away and picked up his water.

‘I have a hundred and fifty thousand at the moment. I’ll let our HQ know about your expectations, but with all the military expenditure I’m not sure they’ll agree.’

‘Your decision. That’s all. I’ll wait for a reply. From you or via Tehran.’

Hamseh stood up, gathered his belongings, and said goodbye. Sokolov was clearly taken aback.

‘Won’t you have a shower? Let me treat you to a meal afterwards.’

‘I’m going home. I’ll wait for news from you.’

The Iranian left the tennis court. Oleg was dejected. He packed his racket and balls into his bag. He lit a cigarette and trudged towards the car park.

Aleks was over the moon, it was as if he’d won the lottery. He’d recorded everything he had heard. The fact that Iran and Russia were cooperating closely did not surprise him. In connection with its attack on Ukraine, Moscow was seeking military equipment from all potential suppliers. The information about an agreement being reached a year ago with the aim of destabilising Saudi Arabia’s government and triggering panic on the global crude oil market was very significant. Confirmation that Hamseh and the Iranian intelligence service were involved in the recent terrorist attacks in Riyadh was even more important to Niwiński; until now the assumptions shared by him and Faris had been based solely on suppositions and CCTV images. Russia’s financial contribution to these activities was political dynamite which would destroy its relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; a particularly devastating situation as Moscow was seeking military aid from the Saudis…

He had to drive to the embassy at once and relay the information he had gained to HQ in Warsaw. He felt pleased that there was no need to prepare an assessment of its credibility as the information came straight from the source and was entirely credible. He had a long afternoon ahead of him in the communications room, but the thought filled him with great pleasure.

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