

Blackwater founder held secret Seychelles meeting to establish Trump-Putin back channel

By Adam Entous, Greg Miller, Kevin Sieff and Karen DeYoung

April 3 at 4:29 PM

The United Arab Emirates arranged a secret meeting in January between Blackwater founder Erik Prince and a Russian close to President Vladimir Putin as part of an apparent effort to establish a back-channel line of communication between Moscow and President-elect Donald Trump, according to U.S., European and Arab officials.

The meeting took place around Jan. 11 — nine days before Trump's inauguration — in the Seychelles islands in the Indian Ocean, officials said. Though the full agenda remains unclear, the UAE agreed to broker the meeting in part to explore whether Russia could be persuaded to curtail its relationship with Iran, including in Syria, a Trump administration objective that would be likely to require major concessions to Moscow on U.S. sanctions.

Though Prince had no formal role with the Trump campaign or transition team, he presented himself as an unofficial envoy for Trump to high-ranking Emiratis involved in setting up his meeting with the Putin confidant, according to the officials, who did not identify the Russian.

Prince was an avid supporter of Trump. After the Republican convention, he contributed \$250,000 to Trump's campaign, the national party and a pro-Trump super PAC led by GOP mega-donor Rebekah Mercer, records show. He has ties to people in Trump's circle, including Stephen K. Bannon, now serving as the president's chief strategist and senior counselor. Prince's sister Betsy DeVos serves as education secretary in the Trump administration. And Prince was seen in the Trump transition offices in New York in December.

U.S. officials said the FBI has been scrutinizing the Seychelles meeting as part of a broader probe of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election and alleged contacts between associates of Putin and Trump. The FBI declined to comment.

The Seychelles encounter, which one official said spanned two days, adds to an expanding web of connections between Russia and Americans with ties to Trump — contacts that the White House has been reluctant to acknowledge or explain until they have been exposed by news organizations.

“We are not aware of any meetings, and Erik Prince had no role in the transition,” said Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary.

A Prince spokesman said in a statement: “Erik had no role on the transition team. This is a complete fabrication. The meeting had nothing to do with President Trump. Why is the so-called under-resourced intelligence community messing around with surveillance of American citizens when they should be hunting terrorists?”

Prince is best known as the founder of Blackwater, a security firm that became a symbol of U.S. abuses in Iraq after a series of incidents, including one in 2007 in which the company’s guards were accused — and later criminally convicted — of killing civilians in a crowded Iraqi square. Prince sold the firm, which was subsequently re-branded, but has continued building a private paramilitary empire with contracts across the Middle East and Asia. He now heads a Hong Kong-based company known as the Frontier Services Group.

Prince would probably have been seen as too controversial to serve in any official capacity in the Trump transition or administration. But his ties to Trump advisers, experience with clandestine work and relationship with the royal leaders of the Emirates — where he moved in 2010 amid mounting legal problems for his American business — would have positioned him as an ideal go-between.

The Seychelles meeting came after separate private discussions in New York involving high-ranking representatives of Trump with both Moscow and the Emirates.

The White House has acknowledged that Michael T. Flynn, Trump’s original national security adviser, and Trump adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner met with the Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak, in late November or early December in New York.

Flynn and Kushner were joined by Bannon for a separate meeting with the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who made an undisclosed visit to New York later in December, according to the U.S., European and Arab officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

In an unusual breach of protocol, the UAE did not notify the Obama administration in advance of the visit, though officials found out because Zayed’s name appeared on a flight manifest.

Officials said Zayed and his brother, the UAE’s national security adviser, coordinated the Seychelles meeting with Russian government officials with the goal of establishing an unofficial back channel between Trump and Putin.

Officials said Zayed wanted to be helpful to both leaders, who had talked about working more closely together, a policy objective long advocated by the crown prince. The UAE, which sees Iran as one of its main enemies, also shared the Trump team's interest in finding ways to drive a wedge between Moscow and Tehran.

Zayed met twice with Putin in 2016, according to Western officials, and urged the Russian leader to work more closely with the Emirates and Saudi Arabia — an effort to isolate Iran.

At the time of the Seychelles meeting and for weeks afterward, the UAE believed that Prince had the blessing of the new administration to act as its unofficial representative. The Russian participant was a person whom Zayed knew was close to Putin from his interactions with both men, the officials said.

Scrutiny over Russia

When the Seychelles meeting took place, official contacts between members of the incoming Trump administration and the Russian government were under intense scrutiny, both from federal investigators and the press.

Less than a week before the Seychelles meeting, U.S. intelligence agencies released a report accusing Russia of intervening clandestinely during the 2016 election to help Trump win the White House.

The FBI was already investigating communications between Flynn and Kislyak. [The Washington Post's David Ignatius](#) first disclosed those communications on Jan. 12, around the time of the Seychelles meeting. Flynn was subsequently fired by Trump for misleading Vice President Pence and others about his discussions with Kislyak.

Yousef Al Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador in Washington, declined to comment.

Government officials in the Seychelles said they were not aware of any meetings between Trump and Putin associates in the country around Jan. 11. But they said luxury resorts on the island are ideal for clandestine gatherings like the one described by the U.S., European and Arab officials.

"I wouldn't be surprised at all," said Barry Faure, the Seychelles secretary of state for foreign affairs. "The Seychelles is the kind of place where you can have a good time away from the eyes of the media. That's even printed in our tourism marketing. But I guess this time you smelled something."

Trump has dismissed the investigations of Russia's role in the election as "fake news" and a "witch hunt."

The level of discretion surrounding the Seychelles meeting seems extraordinary given the frequency with which senior Trump advisers, including Flynn and Kushner, had interacted with Russian officials in the United States, including at the high-profile Trump Tower in New York.

Steven Simon, a National Security Council senior director for the Middle East and North Africa in the Obama White House, said: “The idea of using business cutouts, or individuals perceived to be close to political leaders, as a tool of diplomacy is as old as the hills. These unofficial channels are desirable precisely because they are deniable; ideas can be tested without the risk of failure.”

Current and former U.S. officials said that while Prince refrained from playing a direct role in the Trump transition, his name surfaced so frequently in internal discussions that he seemed to function as an outside adviser whose opinions were valued on a range of issues, including plans for overhauling the U.S. intelligence community.

He appears to have particularly close ties to Bannon, appearing multiple times as a guest on Bannon’s satellite radio program over the past year as well as in articles on the Breitbart Web site that Bannon ran before joining the Trump campaign.

In a July interview with Bannon, Prince said those seeking forceful U.S. leadership should “wait till January and hope Mr. Trump is elected.” And he lashed out at President Barack Obama, saying that because of his policies “the terrorists, the fascists, are winning.”

Days before the November election, Prince appeared on Bannon’s program again, saying that he had “well-placed sources” in the New York City Police Department telling him they were preparing to make arrests in the investigation of former congressman Anthony Weiner (D-N.Y.) over allegations he exchanged sexually explicit texts with a minor. Flynn tweeted a link to the Breitbart report on the claim. No arrests occurred.

Prince went on to make unfounded assertions that damaging material recovered from Weiner’s computers would implicate Hillary Clinton and her close adviser, Huma Abedin, who was married to Weiner. He also called Abedin an “agent of influence very sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.”

Prince and his family were major GOP donors in 2016. The Center for Responsive Politics reported that the family gave more than \$10 million to GOP candidates and super PACs, including about \$2.7 million from his sister, DeVos, and her husband.

Prince’s father, Edgar Prince, built his fortune through an auto-parts company. Betsy married Richard DeVos Jr., heir to the Amway fortune.

Erik Prince has had lucrative contracts with the UAE government, which at one point paid his firm a reported \$529 million to help bring in foreign fighters to help assemble an internal paramilitary force capable of carrying out secret operations and protecting Emirati installations from terrorist attacks.

Focus on Iran

The Trump administration and the UAE appear to share a similar preoccupation with Iran. Current and former officials said that Trump advisers were focused throughout the transition period on exploring ways to get Moscow to break ranks with Tehran.

“Separating Russia from Iran was a common theme,” said a former intelligence official in the Obama administration who met with Trump transition officials. “It didn’t seem very well thought out. It seemed a little premature. They clearly had a very specific policy position, which I found odd given that they hadn’t even taken the reins and explored with experts in the U.S. government the pros and cons of that approach.”

Michael McFaul, former U.S. ambassador to Russia, said he also had discussions with people close to the Trump administration about the prospects of drawing Russia away from Iran. “When I would hear this, I would think, ‘Yeah that’s great for you guys, but why would Putin ever do that?’ ” McFaul said. “There is no interest in Russia ever doing that. They have a long relationship with Iran. They’re allied with Iran in fighting in Syria. They sell weapons to Iran. Iran is an important strategic partner for Russia in the Middle East.”

Following the New York meeting between the Emiratis and Trump aides, Zayed was approached by Prince, who said he was authorized to act as an unofficial surrogate for the president-elect, according to the officials. He wanted Zayed to set up a meeting with a Putin associate. Zayed agreed and proposed the Seychelles as the meeting place because of the privacy it would afford both sides. “He wanted to be helpful,” one official said of Zayed.

Wealthy Russians and Emirati royalty have a particularly large footprint on the islands. Signs advertising deep-sea fishing trips are posted in Cyrillic. Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov owns North Island, where Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, went on their honeymoon in 2011. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, president of the UAE, built a hilltop palace for himself with views across the chain of islands.

The Emiratis have given hundreds of millions of dollars to the Seychelles in recent years for causes including public health and affordable housing. But when the Emirati royal family visits, they are rarely seen.

“The jeep comes to their private jet on the tarmac and they disappear,” said one Seychellois official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to be seen as criticizing the Emiratis.

Zayed, the crown prince, owns a share of the Seychelles’ Four Seasons, a collection of private villas scattered on a lush hillside on the main island’s southern shore, overlooking the Indian Ocean, according to officials in the Seychelles. The hotel is tucked away on a private beach, far from the nearest public road.

Current and former U.S. officials who have worked closely with Zayed, who is often referred to as MBZ, say it would be out of character for him to arrange the Jan. 11 meeting without getting a green light in advance from top aides to Trump and Putin, if not the leaders themselves. “MBZ is very cautious,” said an American businessman who knows Zayed and spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. “There had to be a nod.”

The Seychelles meeting was deemed productive by the UAE and Russia, but the idea of arranging additional meetings between Prince and Putin’s associates was dropped, officials said. Even unofficial contacts between Trump and Putin associates had become too politically risky, officials said.

Sieff reported from the Seychelles. Julie Tate, Devlin Barrett, Matea Gold, Tom Hamburger and Rosalind S. Helderman contributed to this report.

Adam Entous writes about national security, foreign policy and intelligence for The Post. He joined the newspaper in 2016 after more than 20 years with The Wall Street Journal and Reuters, where he covered the Pentagon, the CIA, the White House and Congress. He covered President George W. Bush for five years after the September 11, 2001, attacks.

Greg Miller covers intelligence agencies and terrorism for The Washington Post. [🐦 Follow @gregpmiller](#)

Kevin Sieff has been The Post's Africa bureau chief since 2014. He served previously as the bureau chief in Kabul and had covered the U.S. -Mexico border. [🐦 Follow @ksieff](#)

Karen DeYoung is associate editor and senior national security correspondent for the Washington Post. [🐦 Follow @karendeyoung1](#)

Share news tips with us confidentially

Do you have information the public should know? Here are some ways you can securely send information and documents to Post journalists.

[Learn more »](#)

