

# Saudi Military Chief Accused of Corruption

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Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

## The general's firing will prompt speculation about changes in Yemen policy and royal family opposition to the crown prince.

In a Royal Court announcement on August 31, King Salman ordered that Prince Fahd bin Turki, commanding general of the Saudi Joint Forces, be retired from the army and investigated for “suspicious financial dealings.” Also fired was his son Prince Abdulaziz, the deputy governor of al-Jawf province who was [previously seen as an up-and-coming young royal \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/meet-the-next-generation-of-saudi-rulers\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/meet-the-next-generation-of-saudi-rulers). Four other officials are also being investigated; in the meantime, Lt. Gen. Mutlaq al-Azima, deputy chief of the general staff, has been appointed acting commander.

Since early 2018, General Fahd, a career soldier, has been in charge of the Saudi-led coalition fighting Iranian-assisted Houthi rebels in Yemen. The military action to displace the Houthis from Sanaa started soon after King Salman ascended to the throne in January 2015. At the time, it was seen as a signature policy initiative of the king's son, Muhammad bin Salman (aka MbS), who had just been appointed defense minister.

Costing an estimated \$1 billion per month, the Yemen campaign has been an expensive failure. The Houthis still control Sanaa and the most populous parts of the country, while the Iranian role has mushroomed [to include the supply of missiles \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-un-exposes-houthi-reliance-on-iranian-weapons\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-un-exposes-houthi-reliance-on-iranian-weapons) capable of reaching Riyadh. The Saudi military's incompetence has become increasingly obvious, and its reputation further damaged by inaccurate airstrikes that have caused numerous civilian casualties. MbS and his younger brother Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman increasingly appear hands-off on Yemen policy, [seeking a diplomatic exit \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/riyadh-agreement-redux-political-gains-still-dogged-by-implementation-conce\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/riyadh-agreement-redux-political-gains-still-dogged-by-implementation-conce) without having to admit defeat or concede the appearance of victory for Iran.

As for internal royal family politics, General Fahd is a full cousin of MbS—like King Salman, his father was one of the coterie of influential full brothers known as the Sudairi Seven, which also included King Fahd, Crown Prince Sultan, and Crown Prince Nayef. Another full brother is Prince Ahmad, whom MbS has apparently detained on suspicion of working against his future succession. Former crown prince Muhammad bin Nayef **is also reportedly confined** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/implications-of-the-saudi-corruption-arrests>) for similar reasons.

Although already de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, MbS often appears to fear plots that may prevent him from formally succeeding his ailing, elderly father. The corruption allegation against General Fahd will only enliven rumors that there are other issues in play besides dissatisfaction with the Yemen campaign. Senior princes are rarely sacked from government positions, and when they are, succession-related politics are likely a factor (e.g., Mitab bin Abdullah, son of King Salman’s predecessor, was fired as national guard minister in 2017). For Washington, the change in military leadership could be an opportunity to engage Riyadh on changing its Yemen policy and resolving the protracted crisis once and for all.

*Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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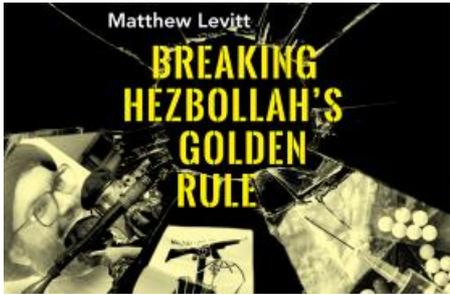
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