

# Saudi Reshuffle Emphasizes Security and Foreign Policy

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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

## Ministerial changes seemed likely in the wake of the Khashoggi crisis, but some of the specifics came as a surprise.

On December 27, Saudi Arabia announced new appointments in the name of King Salman that substantially alter the makeup of the Political and Security Affairs Council, the key decisionmaking body chaired by defense minister and crown prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS). Some had speculated that the king would make changes as a way of constraining MbS, who is widely believed to have ordered the murder of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Indeed, at least eighteen people have been detained or fired over that incident, including several close associates of MbS. Yet the latest announcements may consolidate rather than erode the prince's power base.

On the security and diplomatic front, the Harvard-educated Royal Court official Musaid al-Aiban has been appointed to the revived position of national security advisor. Prince Abdullah bin Bandar, a cousin of MbS, has replaced a peripheral royal as minister of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, one of the kingdom's main military forces. Former finance minister Ibrahim al-Assaf is now the new foreign minister, replacing Adel al-Jubeir, who has been named minister of state for foreign affairs. The latter change is hard to see as anything other than a demotion, though it plays to Jubeir's strengths as a loyal spokesperson, displayed most recently in his faithful recitation of Riyadh's shifting explanations for what happened to Khashoggi. As for Assaf, he was among the numerous notables detained at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in November 2017, though unlike others he was released without any apparent penalty.

Key economic portfolios remain unchanged, with Khalid al-Falih staying on as energy minister and Muhammad al-Jadaan staying on as finance minister. But other institutions have seen notable shifts, such as Turki al-Sheikh leaving the General Sports Authority to take over the General Entertainment Authority, the body charged with enacting elements of the kingdom's recently relaxed attitude toward cinemas and live theater. Sheikh has been

linked with Saud al-Qahtani, a very close MbS associate who was fired for his role in Khashoggi's murder.

Absent from the announcements is the Saudi ambassador in Washington, Prince Khalid bin Salman, the younger brother of MbS who was widely expected to be named national security advisor. Moreover, despite the kingdom's recent steps to address women's rights, there are no women among the new senior appointments.

The extent of the king's involvement in formulating these decisions is probably small. The eighty-two-year-old monarch looked devastated and physically debilitated when he attended the funeral of his elder half-brother Talal a few days before the announcements.

In terms of foreign policy, the changes do not suggest any immediate shift in Riyadh's views on Iran, the Yemen war, or the ongoing diplomatic spat with Qatar. The kingdom is certainly concerned about President Trump's recent decision to pull U.S. forces out of Syria, but the new appointments were likely being prepared before that change in American policy.

*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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