

# Saudi Military Changes Suggest Shift in Yemen Policy

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Feb 27, 2018

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Brief Analysis

## U.S. pressure to end the war may have spurred Riyadh to reorganize its Defense Ministry and shake up its military leadership.

On February 26, King Salman issued a series of nearly forty late-night orders that made sweeping changes to Saudi Arabia's central and provincial governments. Yet the most significant announcements concerned the kingdom's military.

As the state news agency's headline described it, "Royal Order ends services of two senior generals, promotes six, and appoints them in senior posts." One Saudi official characterized the changes as part of a normal rotation, but an equally plausible explanation is that Riyadh may be switching tactics in Yemen under the guise of transforming the Defense Ministry (a plan for reshaping the ministry was approved by King Salman amid yesterday's other announcements). A tactical shift would make particular sense given that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who is also defense minister, will be visiting Washington for talks on the festering conflict and other regional issues next month.

Since intervening in Yemen in 2015 to reinstate President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, Saudi forces have been singularly unsuccessful in their fight against Houthi rebels. While allied military units from the United Arab Emirates seized the port city of Aden and much of the south, the Houthis have been able to hold onto northwest Yemen, which contains around three-quarters of the population. Worse still from Riyadh's point of view is that the kingdom has lost some of its own territory to Houthi forces—according to diplomats, around a hundred square miles of Saudi land along the border is essentially under rebel control, if not actual occupation. Further exacerbating the embarrassment is the fact that Iran, the kingdom's regional archrival, has provided ample clandestine assistance to the Houthis, including long-range missiles that have struck as far as Riyadh and a drone speedboat that badly damaged a Saudi frigate.

Washington wants the Saudis to seek a diplomatic solution to the war, reopening an Omani backchannel with the Houthis and thereby splitting them from their Iranian patrons (who appear delighted at how much impact they are having on the conflict with minimal involvement). It is too early to say whether the new personnel changes reflect a shift in that direction or a determination to push even harder for military victory. The chief of general staff had his service "terminated," as did the commander of the air defense forces, whose responsibilities included protecting Riyadh from missile attack. The head of the land forces was "relieved" of his position, and a new commander was appointed for the Saudi Strategic Missile Force, whose Chinese-supplied long-range missiles are currently trained on Iran.

In the Saudi tradition, these senior officers are non-royals, chosen because they are unlikely to plot any military coups. The sole royal exception is new air force commander Prince Turki bin Bandar bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, a pilot by training and a cousin of the crown prince. The air force has been widely criticized for hitting civilian targets in Yemen, either deliberately or because of a failure to properly use the precision-guided munitions supplied by the United States and Britain.

The U.S. view is that the war is unwinnable, and that Yemen's worsening famine and cholera epidemic reflect badly on Washington and Riyadh alike. Although the crown prince is expected to emphasize the social and economic changes he is bringing to the kingdom during his Washington visit, pressuring him to end the war will be near the top of the American agenda.

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

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