

Saudi Arabia's Family Feud

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

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.



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Facing threats from all directions, King Abdullah is moving to get his foreign policy team in place -- and quell infighting within the royal family.

The usual somnolence of Ramadan in Saudi Arabia is being broken this year by intense politicking within the royal family. Official Saudi work hours for the holy month are limited to just six hours a day, but key princes in the House of Saud are working long and late. Just after midnight local time on July 1, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) announced a "royal order" making Prince Bandar bin Sultan -- formerly the long-serving ambassador to Washington and later the intelligence chief -- King Abdullah's special envoy. Four minutes later, another SPA story announced that Bandar's cousin, Prince Khalid bin Bandar, had been made head of the Saudi intelligence agency.

The two appointments have both domestic and international significance. The Islamic State's invasion of Iraq leaves Saudi Arabia's borders exposed to the chaos of what is left of the "Arab Spring." Bandar bin Sultan, who was replaced as intelligence chief in April after spending several years spearheading Saudi attempts to depose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is now needed to make sure that the jihadists' successes in Iraq threaten Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki without threatening the kingdom. At home, Khalid bin Bandar's elevation to the top position in the country's intelligence community came after he became the victim of a surprisingly public feud within the royal family that saw him pushed out as deputy defense minister a mere six weeks after his appointment.

The turnover at the Saudi Defense Ministry will probably have prompted at least one foreign embassy in Riyadh reporting home to recall Oscar Wilde's line from the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." Bandar's exit from the apparently dysfunctional ministry made him the fourth deputy defense minister to lose his job within the space of 15 months. Like his predecessors, he seems to have fallen afoul of a junior cousin, Muhammad bin Salman, a 30-something son of Crown Prince Salman, the defense minister and heir apparent. The elder Salman, who turns 78 this year, has been widely reported to be suffering from dementia -- the accounts run the gamut from memory issues to Alzheimer's -- making

him personally incapable of running the Defense Ministry.

Muhammad bin Salman has come out of nowhere, relatively speaking. While the major royal players below the level of King Abdullah and the other sons of the late Abdul Aziz, also known as Ibn Saud, are in their 50s and 60s, Muhammad's great -- and perhaps only -- strength is that he is liked and trusted by his father. Starting as a mere advisor, he was made head of the crown prince's court last year and he was further boosted this year to minister of state, which gives him a seat at the weekly meeting of the Council of Ministers. He is the eldest son of Prince Salman's third wife, and his older half-kin include tourism chief and one-time astronaut Prince Sultan bin Salman and Deputy Oil Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, though, significantly, neither is seen very often at their father's side. Although not officially part of the Defense Ministry, Muhammad uses his role as gatekeeper to his father to control decision-making on the kingdom's army, air force, and navy, and thwart what is now a long list of ex-deputy defense ministers.

King Abdullah's prompt action in promoting Prince Khalid to head of intelligence just two days after he was forced to resign from the Defense Ministry suggests that the monarch may act decisively to bring order to his government. "Swiftness" in Saudi terms is a relative concept -- especially during Ramadan -- but, at the very least, Abdullah seems unlikely to appoint another deputy defense minister in the current circumstances and would also be unlikely to allow Crown Prince Salman to press the nomination of his son, Muhammad, to this role.

The crisis also provides an opportunity for Abdullah to complete the sidelining of Salman. This began in early 2013, when the king appointed his half-brother Muqrin as second deputy prime minister, a title which allowed him to chair Council of Ministers meetings in the absence of the king or crown prince. Then in March of this year, Abdullah gave Muqrin the new title of deputy crown prince, putting him on the road to be king when Salman and Abdullah die or become incapacitated. The monarch attempted to lock in this decision by forcing senior princes to give an advance oath of allegiance to Muqrin. A majority -- though not all, significantly -- did so. How such a commitment would work in practice is a matter of speculation: If Abdullah dies first, Salman's supporters would likely press for Salman to be able to declare his own crown prince, ignoring Muqrin's claim on the position.

Abdullah could even take the risky move of citing Salman's inability to control the upheaval at the Defense Ministry and getting a medical committee to certify his mental incompetence, giving the king the opportunity to promote Muqrin as crown prince. Muqrin himself was born on the wrong side of the blanket -- his mother was a slave girl of Ibn Saud. But given the challenges facing the country and Salman's record of annoying princes who might in other circumstances be regarded as in his camp, the timing could be right.

With threats building throughout the Middle East, this is not a time for King Abdullah to procrastinate. The Islamic State's declaration of a caliphate challenges Saudi Arabia's self-appointed role as leader of the Islamic world, while Tehran's cozying up to Washington over Iraq as well as the nuclear issue threatens to undermine Saudi leadership of the Arab world as well. Outside the borders of the kingdom, Abdullah will look to Prince Bandar and Prince Khalid to counter these threats. But at home, he will be the key player. This Ramadan could be a time for unusual amounts of action in the palaces of Riyadh and Jeddah.

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

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