

Bandar Resigns as Head of Saudi Intelligence

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Brief Analysis

The sudden shakeup at the top of the kingdom's intelligence service will likely have implications for Saudi policy on Iran and Syria.

Earlier today, Saudi Arabia announced that controversial prince Bandar bin Sultan had resigned as intelligence chief. According to the official Saudi Press Agency story, the unexpected royal decree stated that Bandar had been "relieved...from his post at his request" and replaced by Gen. Youssef bin Ali al-Idrisi, his deputy at the General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), the Saudi equivalent of the CIA. No mention was made of Bandar's other official position as secretary-general of the Saudi National Security Council.

The news comes less than three weeks after Bandar was reported to be returning from Morocco, where he had been convalescing for several weeks following shoulder surgery. Significantly, the spin on his absence was that he had still been running Saudi intelligence from his hospital bed despite reportedly bequeathing at least the Syria portfolio to his cousin, Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, in January. And last October, Bandar ruffled Washington policymakers by briefing foreign journalists on Saudi exasperation regarding the Obama administration's Middle East policies.

In the absence of fuller information, particularly on the status of his National Security Council role, the change is likely explicable in terms of Bandar's health. In addition to his reported shoulder surgery, the sixty-five-year-old former ambassador to Washington was using a cane to relieve a leg problem when he received Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) at his Riyadh home in December. Biographers of the colorful prince also mention other ailments, including a bad back (due to an injury sustained during his career as a fighter pilot) and a tendency toward depression.

Bandar's 2012 appointment as intelligence chief was seen as a reflection of King Abdullah's policy on two key issues at the time: his hardline stance against the Assad regime in Damascus, and his determination to thwart Iran's emergence as a nuclear-armed regional rival to Saudi Arabia. Today's leadership switch allows for the possibility that these policies may be changing, as suggested by recent Saudi restrictions on supporting jihadists in Syria. But

whether General Idrisi, a nonroyal, has the political weight to implement policy is questionable. Recent intelligence chiefs have all been princes; Bandar himself took over from Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, who was named deputy crown prince last month.

If Bandar retains his National Security Council role, he will continue to wield influence in Riyadh. But given his antipathy toward Washington in recent months, the change may suggest an opportunity to further close the rift between the United States and the kingdom following last month's meeting between President Obama and King Abdullah outside Riyadh. That assessment depends on which officials are promoted to fill the gaps that Bandar's resignation will leave.

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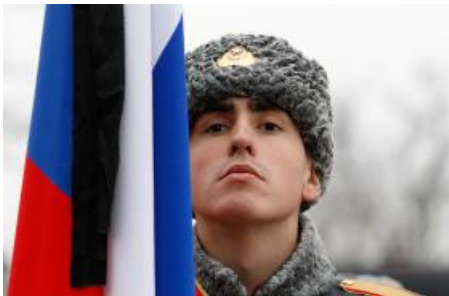
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