

Changing the Guard at the Saudi Defense Ministry

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.



Brief Analysis

Although the U.S. military now has a more competent royal defense partner in Prince Fahd bin Abdullah bin Muhammad, his appointment could provoke destabilizing countermoves within the House of Saud.

In a surprise announcement on April 20, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia appointed a relatively unknown prince as deputy defense minister, a post that effectively runs the kingdom's regular military. The change comes on the eve of U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's visit to Riyadh, during which he will finalize the sale of advanced missiles for the kingdom's American-supplied F-15 aircraft.

The new minister, Prince Fahd bin Abdullah bin Muhammad, replaces Prince Khalid bin Sultan, who originally came to prominence in 1990 when he was placed in command of Saudi forces during the U.S.-led Operation Desert Storm. To the apparent concern of King Fahd, the ruler at the time, Khalid relished the role and reaped unseemly personal financial gain from its logistical aspects, so it was hardly surprising when he was later retired. But Khalid returned to the fore as assistant defense minister in 2001, serving under his father, Prince Sultan, the longtime minister, and his uncle, Abdulrahman, the lackluster deputy minister. Administratively strong, Khalid had questionable military skills and was blamed for the poor performance of Saudi forces against Houthi rebels on the Yemeni border in 2009. Therefore, when Sultan died in 2011, the top position went to his uncle, Prince Salman, while Khalid had to content himself with deputy minister until his dismissal this weekend.

Given Salman's increasing dementia and additional duties as crown prince, the new deputy minister -- who formerly commanded the navy -- will actually control the ministry and its huge budget. In light of the ninety-year-old monarch's frail health and the crown prince's limitations, the appointment will be examined in terms of royal politics and the succession process. Prince Fahd's pedigree is not part of the House of Saud's mainstream, so he is not a potential future king. But Khalid's sacking will likely be seen as a setback for some of the king's rival half-brothers (the so-called Sudairi princes) and their sons. Ironically, perhaps, the new deputy defense minister is

distantly related to the Sudairis.

For Washington, Fahd's appointment means that the U.S. military now has a competent, experienced, and authoritative royal to deal with in further developing the longstanding bilateral relationship. The long-range air-launched missiles that will be discussed during Secretary Hagel's visit are an important element in U.S. efforts to counter Iran's apparent hegemonic regional ambitions. But Washington should also be concerned that this latest twist in royal politics could provoke destabilizing countermoves within the House of Saud.

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

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