The Prince and the Revolution

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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.

Articles & Testimony

Saudi Arabia is bringing back its most talented operator to manage the Arab Spring. But can Bandar stem the rot in Riyadh?

On July 19, the eve of the Saudi weekend and the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the Saudi government orchestrated its equivalent of Washington's Friday afternoon news dump: Prince Bandar bin Sultan, son of the late crown prince and defense minister, Sultan, was appointed the new intelligence chief.

The kingdom may want minimal coverage and analysis of Bandar's appointment, but it is bound to be disappointed. Bandar used to be one of Saudi Arabia's flashiest diplomats, a longtime ambassador to the United States renowned for manipulating people and policy in the kingdom's favor, and sometimes also in favor of the U.S. government. At the very least, his appointment is a reflection of King Abdullah's concerns about developments in the Middle East, particularly Syria, and the limited talent pool in the House of Saud to meet the challenges. Frankly, it suggests panic in Riyadh.

Where does one start? Bandar certainly used to be a firm pair of hands, but recently that grasp has been shakier. Although Bandar endeared himself to successive U.S. administrations for being able to get things done -- as well as the sumptuous parties he hosted at his official residence in Virginia overlooking the Potomac -- the prevailing story recently has been about his mental state. William Sampson, a (friendly) biographer, noted that Bandar's "first period of full-blown depression" came in the mid-1990s. Another biographer, David Ottaway, described Bandar as a "more than occasional drinker," and most conversations about him seemed to revolve around, only partly mischievously, whether he had finished detoxification or not.

In October 2010, the Saudi Press Agency announced that Bandar had returned to the kingdom "from abroad," to be met at the airport by a bevy of princes. This development prompted me to write a Foreign Policy article making the case that "Bandar is back."

To my slight embarrassment, Bandar then disappeared from sight. But I wasn't wholly surprised about last week's

announcement because Bandar has recently reemerged. In June, when his uncle Crown Prince Nayef died, the Saudi Press Agency published a photo of Bandar, saying he offered his condolences. A week ago, when Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas visited Jeddah, Bandar was also listed as attending his audience with King Abdullah.

Although the kingdom's main obsession is Iran, its immediate preoccupation is Syria. On that issue, Bandar may indeed be the man for the moment. Over the years, he has acquired a reputation for discreet diplomacy and intrigue in both Syria and Lebanon. According to a source close to the ruling family, King Abdullah regards Bandar, who bad-mouthed the then crown prince during his tenure as ambassador to the United States, with caution. At one point, Abdullah went so far as to take Bandar to the side and tell him: "I know you do not represent me in Washington."

But Abdullah still recognizes Bandar's talents. Although Abdullah is often depicted as a Syriaphile, the monarch changed his attitude, especially after the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad castigated his fellow Arab leaders as "half-men" for their failure to support Hezbollah.

Another more recent example of Saudi willingness to play in Syrian politics was the welcome that Bashar's uncle, Rifaat, received in Riyadh when coming to pay his respects last month after Nayef's death. Rifaat has lived in Paris since 1984, having tried and failed to stage a coup after President Hafez al-Assad, his brother and Bashar's father, fell ill. Rifaat is related to King Abdullah by marriage -- one of Rifaat's wives was a sister of one of Abdullah's wives, the mother of deputy foreign minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah. The closeness between Rifaat and Abdullah is more than just kinship: They worked together in the early 1980s when Rifaat was leading the Defense Companies, Syria's praetorian guard, and Abdullah was commander of the Saudi Arabian national guard.

However the kingdom may be adjusting its Syria policy, there is no denying that the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), the Saudi CIA, is badly in need of a shakeup. Its recent record is, to say the least, mixed: Shortly before the 9/11 attacks, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the kingdom's chief interlocutor with the then Taliban regime in Afghanistan, "was relieved of the post at his [own] request." In *Ghost Wars*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the CIA and Osama bin Laden, Steve Coll wrote: "Turki's vast personal riches . . . bothered some of his rivals in the royal family. They felt the Saudi intelligence department had become a financial black hole. . . . Turki's rivals clamored for accountability at the [General Intelligence Department]."

Both Muqrin and Nawaf, the men who served as Saudi intelligence chiefs between Turki and Bandar, lacked flair. Muqrin, who has now been shunted into an undefined advisory role, trained as a fighter pilot, like Bandar. But his primary credential for the job was that he was loyal to King Abdullah. His other qualification was that, like the king, he was not a Sudairi -- the largest group of seven full brothers who have dominated Saudi royal politics for decades and still do, despite the passing of three of them. Nawaf, who took over from Turki, was even more of an Abdullah yes-man. The fiction that he was leading Saudi foreign intelligence was unsustainable after he suffered a stroke during the 2002 Beirut Arab summit. He is still alive, but confined to a wheelchair.

Even if Bandar has regained some of his previous form, the troubles of the Middle East, from a Saudi perspective, are surely more than can be handled by one man. In Syria, Riyadh wants Bashar out but does not want the contagion to spread to Jordan. To Riyadh's fury, it also finds itself competing for influence in Syria with tiny Qatar, which appears to be just as generous with money and weapons but much far more nimble in responding to events on the ground. Meanwhile, Iran looms over the horizon, gaining in nuclear potential while also, from the kingdom's perspective, fanning the flames of Shiite Muslim discontent in Bahrain and even at home, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Recent clashes between Saudi Shiites and security forces following the arrest of firebrand Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr (literally: Tiger, the Tiger), resulted in the deaths of several protesters and the injury of dozens more.

Bandar's appointment suggests another weakness in Riyadh: King Abdullah, it appears, cannot identify or perhaps trust any other talent within the House of Saud for such a role. Bandar was born on the wrong side of the blanket --

his mother was a Sudanese concubine -- so has no claim as a future king. But what of the senior princes, who should be showing a flair for leadership at this critical juncture? Crown Prince Salman, the defense minister, and Prince Ahmed, the new interior minister, do not appear to inspire confidence.

The next generation, of which Bandar is a member, includes deputy defense minister Prince Khalid bin Sultan and national guard commander Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, as well as Eastern Province governor Prince Muhammed bin Fahd and assistant interior minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. With Saudi Arabia's most senior princes dying off, it's time for this generation to step into a leadership role if the kingdom hopes to avoid a messy succession crisis in the near future -- or at least that is probably what these men, spring chickens in Saudi royal terms but already in their fifties and sixties, think.

But for some reason, King Abdullah has chosen Bandar for a role that, without too much hyperbole, might be described as saving the kingdom. It's an interesting choice.

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

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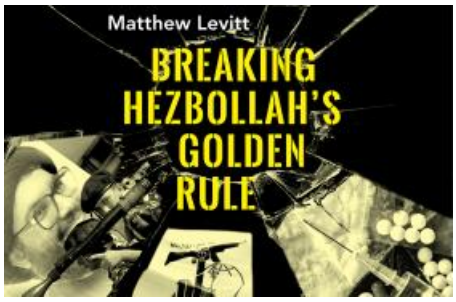

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