

Saudi Defense Shake-Up Changes Minister and Ministry

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Brief Analysis

Saudi Arabia has announced a series of eagerly expected changes forced by the recent death of Crown Prince Sultan, the heir apparent and long-serving defense minister.

On November 5, Saudi Arabia announced a series of eagerly expected changes forced by the recent death of Crown Prince Sultan, the heir apparent and long-serving defense minister. The key announcement was that Riyadh provincial governor Prince Salman will now head the Ministry of Defense. Passed over for the job were Prince Abdulrahman, the vice minister of defense who was "relieved" of his post as part of the shakeup, and Sultan's son Prince Khaled, the assistant defense minister and de facto head of the ministry for the past several years. Khaled, whose forces performed poorly during fighting along the Yemen border in 2009, must now settle for the position of deputy minister.

The role of defense minister in Saudi Arabia is enormously powerful and, at least in the past, hugely rewarding on a personal level as well. Earnings from commissions on the many billions spent on arms contracts made Prince Sultan one of the richest people in the world -- wealth he reportedly shared generously with other princes, officials, and Saudi military officers.

The ministry is also to have its role reduced. Formerly known as the Ministry of Defense and Aviation, which included responsibility for Saudi Arabian Airlines, it now becomes just the Ministry of Defense. The kingdom's flag carrier, which has more than eighty Boeing aircraft either in operation or on order, will now fall under the newly created independent General Commission of Civil Aviation, whose chairman will be the minor prince who held similar responsibilities in the old Defense Ministry.

Prince Salman's elevation will firm up his reputation as a likely future monarch after King Abdullah (eighty-eight years old) and Crown Prince Nayef (seventy-eight). But Salman himself is already seventy-five, and his health is uncertain. Despite physiotherapy, one of his arms is still largely immobile following a stroke.

Salman's appointment will likely be welcomed across the world by generations of foreign ambassadors to Riyadh, who generally perceived him as easier to deal with and more modern in outlook than other senior princes. But this "modernity" is relative: when then U.S. ambassador Robert Jordan arrived in the kingdom in October 2001, Salman suggested to him that the September 11 attacks had been a "Zionist plot." The ambassador had to request that CIA briefers visit the kingdom to convince royals, including then crown prince Abdullah and Prince Nayef, otherwise (Jordan related this story during a 2009 Washington Institute Policy Forum; [listen to audio of his remarks \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3090\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3090)).

In terms of U.S. policy, Salman now becomes the point man for the detailed negotiations on the \$60 billion defense contract reached last year between Washington and Riyadh. The deal is intended to bolster the kingdom's conventional defenses against the specter of an Iranian nuclear threat. Although a significant portion of the equipment, including attack helicopters, is destined for the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) -- controlled by King Abdullah's son, Prince Mitab -- Salman will be responsible for absorbing the new materiel on order for the army and air force.

In terms of the often-opaque royal family politics, Salman's appointment breaks the monopoly that Sultan and his immediate family held over the Defense Ministry while still preserving it as a fiefdom of the so-called Sudairi princes (Salman was a full brother of Sultan). But recent second-tier appointments show that competition is heating up for powerful positions among the grandsons of the kingdom's late founder, Ibn Saud. King Abdullah's sons Mitab and Abdulaziz are SANG commander and deputy foreign minister, respectively. And Nayef's sons Muhammad and Saud serve as deputy interior minister for internal security and head of the crown prince's court, respectively. Salman's sons will surely be seeking promotion. But with his father now dead, Prince Khaled has probably been marginalized, a typical fate of other sons of deceased kings or senior princes.

Simon Henderson, the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute, is author of [After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=315\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=315). ❖

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