

Changing the Guard at the Saudi Embassy in Washington

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Brief Analysis

On July 20, the Saudi foreign ministry announced that Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the long-serving Saudi ambassador to the United States, was stepping down, and that "the process of nominating" Prince Turki al-Faisal, the current Saudi ambassador in London, to replace him had begun. When the widely anticipated death of the recently hospitalized, eighty-four-year-old King Fahd occurs, both Prince Turki and Prince Bandar, as senior "next generation" princes, could be crucial players.

Bandar's Future?

Prince Bandar made his post the envy of diplomatic Washington: he spent little time there, but his contacts and access were superb. Signals of his departure had been evident for some time, but the fact that he was not immediately appointed to another senior post came as a surprise. After twenty-two years as ambassador, he has vast experience, and many believed he aspired to the post of foreign minister (currently held by Prince Saud al-Faisal, brother of Prince Turki). Observers in Washington have speculated for months that Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler, offered to appoint Bandar head of the General Intelligence Department, the Saudi equivalent of the CIA. The post has been vacant since January; Bandar was reportedly reluctant to accept it, however.

Prince Turki: Courting Controversy

The early public naming of Prince Turki, before Washington formally agrees to his nomination, appears to be a breach of diplomatic protocol. Perhaps President Bush indicated approval during his April meeting in Texas with Crown Prince Abdullah. If not, Riyadh's move could lead to a delay in the appointment. At worst, aspects of Prince Turki's resume could face greater scrutiny. After all, he served as head of the General Intelligence Department from 1977 until ten days before the September 11 attacks. He was also the chief Saudi interlocutor with the Taliban in Afghanistan and, as such, was initially named as a defendant in U.S. civil suits filed on behalf of victims of the attacks and their relatives. His name, along with those of other Saudi officials, was dropped from the suits after a judge ruled that such figures had sovereign immunity, whatever the truth of the allegations against them. Prince Turki has always ridiculed the charges against him and asserted that the continuing complaint against some 200 Saudi individuals and institutions is also without foundation. In a July 24 interview with the Saudi newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat, he committed another breach of protocol for a nominated but not-yet-accepted ambassador when he stated,

"The U.S. judiciary, like the Saudi judiciary, is independent. If these courts closed these cases, we would have achieved what we are seeking."

The most detailed account of Prince Turki's activities in Afghanistan was laid out in *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, for which Washington Post journalist Steve Coll won a 2005 Pulitzer prize. In one passage, the book discusses Turki's 1998 trip to the Afghan city of Kandahar, during which the prince claims he won a commitment from Taliban leader Mullah Omar to hand over Osama bin Laden, then wanted by the Saudis. The deal collapsed, and Coll writes of suspicions in Washington over Turki's version of events and, indeed, a possible meeting he may have had at the time with bin Laden himself. The prince was also the CIA's primary liaison to the Saudi government. According to Coll, "The Saudis worked assiduously to maintain diverse contacts within the CIA, outside of official channels. Several retired Riyadh station chiefs and senior Near East Division managers went on the Saudi payroll as consultants during the mid-1990s." A footnote makes it clear they "were consultants for Prince Turki."

Coll also offers some explanation of why Prince Turki was reportedly dismissed from his General Intelligence post immediately before September 11, even though his departure was officially described as being "at his request." Coll writes: "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]."

On Middle East issues, particularly Israeli-Palestinian peace, Prince Turki tends to take a hardline stance, blaming the international community in a recent London speech for "showing indifference to Israeli aggression and inhuman treatment towards Palestinians, [while] swift action has been taken when UN resolutions have been violated in other areas." Educated at Princeton, Georgetown, and Oxford, he has a reputation for sophistication that occasionally seems at odds with some of his public remarks. For example, in the June 19 edition of *Arab Business*, he made an arguably gratuitous remark to a journalist interviewing him for a profile. Explaining why he had just shaken hands with a rabbi at a conference in Jordan, he said, "[O]ur Prophet, peace be upon him, made a treaty with the Jews and Rabbis in Medina, and he held his part of the bargain until they broke that treaty, and then he took action against them."

U.S. Saudi Relations Post-September 11

The intended ambassadorial changeover is occurring at a time when U.S.-Saudi relations remain awkward, as they have been since the September 11 attacks. On July 14, Undersecretary of the Treasury Stuart Levey told a Senate committee that Saudi individuals remain "a significant source" of funds for Islamist terrorists.

Moreover, if and when he assumes the post, Prince Turki will take over an embassy battered by negative publicity. Following the September 11 attacks, investigators discovered that charity checks drawn by a staff member on a bank account of Prince Bandar's wife, Princess Haifa (coincidentally, a sister of Prince Turki), had found their way to two of the hijackers. Later, the embassy's accounts with the now defunct Riggs Bank were investigated because of suspicious payments and large cash withdrawals. For months thereafter, the embassy could not find a bank to handle its accounts; it only recently began using the local branch of a British-based bank.

The U.S.-Saudi relationship remains important, of course, because of the kingdom's role as the world's largest oil exporter and a leader of the Islamic world. Prior to September 2001, Prince Bandar was a key architect of the relationship, often to the detriment of his counterparts at the U.S. embassy in Riyadh. His departure should be seen as an opportunity for U.S. officials to recast the manner in which the relationship is administered diplomatically. The nomination of Prince Turki is a clear indication of how Riyadh views the road ahead. But the United States needs to consider whether such a high-profile ambassador is even necessary.

Simon Henderson is a London-based senior fellow of The Washington Institute and author of its 1994 policy paper [After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia \(templateC04.php?CID=15\)](#).

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