Inconsistent U.S. Representation in Saudi Arabia:

A Continuing Problem

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.

Brief Analysis

The surprise announcement that Robert Jordan, U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, will leave his post by mid-October means that Washington will lack an authoritative voice in the kingdom at a crucial time in the war on terror. One State Department official has claimed that Jordan's resignation was for personal reasons and that "Saudi Arabia holds him in the highest regard." Yet, other reports suggest that Jordan's public and semipublic criticisms of the kingdom have annoyed Riyadh.

Controversial Remarks

In the months since May 12, 2003, when ten Americans were killed in attacks against three expatriate residential compounds in Riyadh, several of Ambassador Jordan's comments have created a stir. Analysts are accustomed to U.S. officials employing a cautious and laudatory approach when publicly describing relations with Saudi Arabia. Hence, many were astonished when, during an interview with CBS News soon after the Riyadh attacks, Jordan stated that Washington's previous requests for increased security at the compounds had been ignored. He made similar comments to the New York Times a day later, this time singling out Crown Prince Abdullah and Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal for praise. By implication, Jordan was pointing the blame in the direction of Interior Minister Prince Nayef, who is in charge of internal security and has a reputation for being difficult.

Jordan sparked further controversy with comments in a September 15 Time magazine cover story entitled "The Saudis: Whose Side Are They On in the War on Terror?" The story quoted Prince Saud al-Faisal on the issue of funds flowing to terrorist groups: "The money aspect is now completely controlled, and your government knows it." Juxtaposed against this optimism, however, was a contradictory comment from Jordan: "It is sort of like trying to stamp out crabgrass. As soon as you stamp one [funding organization] out, something springs up somewhere else under a different name."

Ambassador Jordan's cause celebre, though, occurred on July 9, when the London-based pan-Arab newspaper al-Quds al-Arabi published comments ascribed to him. The newspaper, which has long been critical of Riyadh and which has published communiqués by both Osama bin Laden and Saddam Husayn, claimed that Jordan had made

remarks regarding succession in the kingdom at a Saudi dinner party. The ambassador reportedly stated that Washington wanted the current crown prince, Abdullah, to become the next ruler when the ailing King Fahd dies, with a member of the kingdom's younger generation of princes becoming the next crown prince. Such a scenario implies that the next two contenders to the throne after Abdullah, Defense Minister Prince Sultan (father of the Saudi ambassador in Washington, Prince Bandar) and Prince Nayef, would be passed over. Accounts of this dinner recalling the same details were circulating as early as June at the World Economic Forum meeting in Amman. On September 26, an Associated Press story quoted U.S. officials who contended that Ambassador Jordan had been misquoted. Yet, the story also quoted a guest at a subsequent dinner who said that Jordan claimed his previous remarks "had been taken out of context, had been of a personal nature and were not an attempt to send a message from the U.S. government."

That senior members of the Saudi royal family would be upset over Jordan's succession comments should come as no surprise. Indeed, Riyadh will condemn "anything approaching involvement in succession"; as a former senior U.S. official put it, "U.S. interest in internal politics causes 'immediate Saudi heartburn'" (see Simon Henderson, After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia, The Washington Institute, 1995).

A Pattern of Short-Term or Missing U.S. Ambassadors

Ambassador Jordan has served a mere sixteen months at his post since presenting his credentials. By comparison, Prince Bandar recently completed his twentieth year as Saudi ambassador to the United States. For nearly one-third of his tenure, Prince Bandar did not have an American counterpart in Riyadh. During his other fourteen years of service in Washington, there have been seven U.S. ambassadors in Riyadh, with an average tenure of less than two years. This pattern of short tenure and long gaps between new appointments has undercut the ability of individual U.S. ambassadors to become familiar with Saudi Arabia and its elite, a problem exacerbated by the reliance on appointees with little background in the region. For example, the past three U.S. ambassadors to Saudi Arabia could not speak Arabic, and the ambassador with the best Arabic skills of the past two decades, Hume Horan, was unceremoniously thrown out of the kingdom.

As a result of this inconsistent representation, communications between the United States and Saudi Arabia have been criticized as being lopsided, going through Prince Bandar in Washington rather than through the U.S. ambassador in Riyadh. In his 1991 book The Commanders, Bob Woodward wrote that former defense secretary Richard Cheney "considered Bandar a little bit off the wall and not necessarily a 100 percent clear channel." Nevertheless, Bandar has ready access to the White House under President George W. Bush and an especially close friendship with Secretary of State Colin Powell, a one-time tennis partner who reportedly bonded with Bandar after the Saudi press called them both "dark princes" (Bandar's dark complexion -- which he owes to his mother, a Sudanese concubine -- effectively bars him from becoming king).

So far there is no news of who might replace Ambassador Jordan or whether the process of finding a candidate has even begun. Traditionally, the post has gone to political appointees rather than to career foreign service officers. Indeed, a senior friend of the president is likely to be chosen; Jordan was a founding partner in the Texas law firm Baker Botts, a leading corporate donor to Bush's 2000 campaign, while his predecessors during the Clinton administration were Wyche Fowler, a former Democratic senator from Georgia, and Raymond Mabus, a former Democratic governor of Mississippi.

The net result of this uncertainty is that, for an indeterminate interval, official U.S. contacts in Saudi Arabia will be hampered by a lack of access. Theoretically, ambassadors have a right to direct meetings with heads of state; a charge d'affaires -- who acts as head of mission in the absence of an ambassador -- does not. It will be particularly interesting to see whether current U.S. charg d'affaires Margaret Scobey can gain access to the royal family; her role might test Saudi Arabia's conservative, male-dominated political structure. In addition to the war on terror, Iraq, and

Middle East peace, Washington's contacts with Riyadh are important in the area of oil policy, which is crucial to the revitalization of the world economy. Last week, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cartel, of which Saudi Arabia is the leading member, decided to cut production, causing an immediate surge in prices. In response, President Bush, who had spoken by telephone with Crown Prince Abdullah just three days earlier, stated, "I would hope our friends in OPEC don't do things that would hurt our economy."

As for succession in Saudi Arabia, it seems certain that as long as King Fahd remains alive, the eighty-year-old Crown Prince Abdullah will lack complete authority. Princes Sultan (age 79) and Nayef (age 70), who have been accused in September 11-related U.S. civil lawsuits of paying off al-Qaeda during the 1990s in order to forestall attacks on the kingdom, are Abdullah's main rivals and remain, despite Ambassador Jordan's reported comments, the most likely future kings in due course.

Finally, Ambassador Jordan himself is unlikely to benefit from the disturbing pattern of former U.S. ambassadors receiving generous funding for various enterprises from semi-official Saudi sources.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute. His latest work, the Washington Institute Policy Paper The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy, has just been published.

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