

Policy Alert

## Saudi Ambassador Switch Overshadows Important Defense Appointment

[Simon Henderson](#)

February 25, 2019

---

Sending a princess to head the embassy in Washington has grabbed the headlines, but her predecessor's elevation to deputy defense minister may have greater policy and political implications.

On February 23, Riyadh announced that it had named Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud as its new ambassador to the United States, bringing the previous envoy, Prince Khalid bin Salman (aka KbS), back home to serve in the Defense Ministry. Although the princess brings a very different background to the post, the prince's promotion may prove to be the more significant change in the end.

Reema is daughter to Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who himself served as ambassador in Washington from 1983 to 2005. Her previous post was with the General Sports Authority, where she encouraged physical education for Saudi girls; she has business experience as well, running the Riyadh outpost of an upmarket London fashion store.

In Washington, she may be able to make progress on repairing diplomatic rifts and advancing other issues by plugging into some of her father's networks. Yet she may also have to deal with the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA), the U.S. law that allows plaintiffs to pursue legal action against the kingdom or its officials for alleged involvement in the September 11 attacks—a plot that unfolded during her father's tenure. Proceedings in one such case are currently at the discovery stage.

Meanwhile, in his new role as deputy defense minister, KbS will serve directly under his full brother Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (aka MbS), who remains defense minister. His resume is a sharp contrast to Princess Reema's, including time as an F-15 pilot who bombed Islamic State targets in Syria. During his tenure in Washington, he developed close links with the Trump administration.

One likely reason behind the switch is Riyadh's desire to restore amicable links with Congress, where sentiment toward the kingdom's leadership has deteriorated drastically since the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi last October. Several lobbyist firms have since canceled their contracts with the Saudi embassy, while legislators [have sponsored numerous resolutions and bills](#) aiming to hold Riyadh and even MbS himself accountable for the incident.

KbS already appears quite committed to his new role in support of his older brother. Two days after his appointment, he visited Saudi forces on the frontlines with Yemen, where the kingdom is trying to restore the internationally recognized government overthrown by Iranian-supported Houthi rebels in 2015. After the tour, he met with civil and military personnel at ministry headquarters in Riyadh. In a related development, the kingdom has just announced that it will award an extra month's pay to forces stationed on the border, apparently intending to boost morale in an area still subject to rebel rocket attacks. Yet it remains unclear whether elevating KbS signals a policy shift toward more diplomacy in Yemen or a doubling down on military pressure—an approach that has so far failed to defeat the Houthis.

For its part, Congress is increasingly encouraging UN-mediated peace talks out of concern for Yemen's growing humanitarian crisis and the civilian casualties caused by American-supplied munitions. European officials are doing the same, in part because they are disturbed by the crown prince's growing dominance over Saudi decisionmaking. According to the *Financial Times*, EU leaders warned Egypt that they would not attend the February 25 Arab League dialogue in Sharm al-Sheikh unless King Salman led the Saudi delegation rather than MbS. Germany is especially concerned about the Yemen situation and the Khashoggi incident—in response, it has already refused to supply spare parts for Saudi Arabia's existing fleet of Typhoon fighter-bombers, potentially jeopardizing the multi-billion-dollar sale of additional jets.

Although the king wound up attending the dialogue in the end, the embassy and defense announcements were made while he was in Egypt, creating speculation that he may not have known about the decisions despite their being issued under his name. The eighty-three-year-old monarch is increasingly seen as a mere figurehead, while MbS was welcomed as a de facto head of state during [recent visits to Pakistan, India, and China](#).

Going forward, KbS is theoretically disqualified from becoming deputy crown prince and entering the line of succession directly behind MbS, at least according to Saudi law. But his return to Riyadh may signal that a new double act has emerged, whether to fortify his brother against ongoing international furor or pave the way for future succession maneuvers.

*Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute.*