

Policy Alert

Saudi Arabia's Domestic and Foreign Intelligence Challenges

[Simon Henderson](#)

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A fatal shootout involving security forces and Shiites coincides with a change in the kingdom's intelligence leadership.

Yesterday, two Saudi police officers were killed and two injured in a gunfight while trying to detain "armed troublemakers" in the Eastern Province town of al-Awamiyah. Two Shiites also died in contested circumstances -- opposition activists say they were unarmed, identifying one as a twenty-two-year-old who was shot eleven times while running away, and the other as a local photographer who died as he documented the raid.

The town is close to the coastal city of Qatif, which lies across a bay from Ras Tanura, the world's largest oil export terminal. Although Sunnis make up nearly 90 percent of the kingdom's population, most of this area's inhabitants are Shiites who have long felt economically and politically disadvantaged -- much like the majority Shiites in the neighboring island-state of Bahrain, which has been wracked by demonstrations and clashes for the past three years. Last month, two German diplomats visiting al-Awamiyah were shot at and had their vehicle burned out; the incident was generally interpreted as Saudi security forces warning foreign diplomats to mind their own business.

Trouble in the Shiite area of Saudi Arabia links the two main foreign policy headaches of ninety-year-old King Abdullah. For one, he fears Shiite Iran's apparent diplomatic rapprochement with Washington, which might leave Tehran with much of its nuclear potential intact. The king has also been supporting the overthrow of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, viewing regime change in Damascus as a strategic setback for Iran. Abdullah had given his intelligence chief -- Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the longtime former ambassador to Washington -- a leading role in enacting these policies, but in recent days it has become clear that the prince has been sidelined.

Bandar's Syria responsibilities have been taken over by his cousin, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (known in Washington as MbN). Nayef is the interior minister, which in Saudi terms equates to head of homeland security and the FBI. He was in Washington last week for talks with senior U.S. officials, where he also joined a conclave of intelligence chiefs from Turkey, Qatar, France, and other countries to discuss Syria. The meeting apparently produced a common policy on vetting rebel groups for assistance and excluding the worst jihadists, though differences remain on what weapons to supply, most notably man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS). According to the *Wall Street Journal*, MbN will be actively assisted in his role by Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, the king's senior son and head of the national guard, the kingdom's largest and perhaps most efficient paramilitary force.

It is uncertain whether the changes signal any substantive shift in Saudi policy, however. Bandar's removal, which has not been officially announced, is most likely due to health reasons. Past biographers who had close access to him have reported his susceptibility to depression and problems with alcohol. And when he gave a three-hour late-night briefing to Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) in December, he supported himself with a stick. Bandar is also believed to have favored recruitment of jihadist extremists -- often the most effective fighters against Assad -- and has been frustrated with the hesitancy of U.S. policy on Syria, declining to meet with visiting CIA chief John Brennan several times.

One tweak in Saudi policy was last month's edict prohibiting citizens from going abroad to wage jihad or providing financial and other support for such activities. The significance of this change is still being debated by analysts, though, especially since supporting such activities has been quasi-official Saudi policy for decades in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia, even after negative consequences such as the emergence of al-Qaeda and characters like Usama bin Laden.

An optimistic interpretation of the latest changes is that the reported policy chasm between Riyadh and Washington is being bridged. MbN has a reputation for efficiency -- his accomplishments include the establishment of a deradicalization center for returning Saudi jihadists -- and is said to work well with his U.S. counterparts. He is also considered lucky, having survived the attempted embrace of a suicide bomber who was feigning surrender. But while MbN's late father developed a fearsome reputation during his own time as interior minister, there is uncertainty about the son's ruthlessness in dealing with security threats, considered necessary to win respect.

The clash in al-Awamiyah should serve as a reminder to Washington that Saudi Arabia views its security challenges as part of a continuum rather than distinct. The leadership change in the security and intelligence apparatus could ease friction regarding some of the issues that President Obama and King Abdullah will discuss

when they meet in late March, but gaps remain on the urgency of -- and methods for dealing with -- the Syria problem.

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