

Viewpoints
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BANDAR OUT

Mohammed bin Nayef: Washington's New Favorite Saudi Prince

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Saudi Arabia's longtime powerful ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, has been stripped of all his security and intelligence duties within days of Prince Salman taking over as the kingdom's new ruler. Bandar had been locked in a bitter struggle with Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef for the past two years over which of them was in charge of Saudi policy toward Syria and specifically whether to support rebel Islamic militants there, a Bandar strategy Mohammed had strongly opposed. Now Mohammed has emerged in charge of both domestic and much of Saudi foreign security to the great relief of the Obama administration.

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Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who has been unexpectedly propelled into the line for kingship of Saudi Arabia, is the Saudi favorite of Washington. This is partly because he was instrumental in ending the Saudi gambit to support an Islamic extremist militia fighting to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad of Syria.

The Obama administration had been pressing the Saudis to shut down the operation for some time. The administration found in Mohammed a staunch ally willing to take on the person responsible for the kingdom's risky strategy: Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the long-time Saudi ambassador in Washington and the late King Abdullah's chief of intelligence.

Mohammed's victory over Bandar confirmed the administration's assessment that the powerful Saudi interior minister was by far the best choice among the various young princes vying for a spot in the succession line. In addition, Mohammed was considered a national hero within the ruling House of Saud. He had successfully defended it from an al-Qaeda terrorist onslaught in the mid- and late-2000s including an attempt on his own life that nearly succeeded.

The change in Saudi policy toward the Bandar-promoted "Army of Islam" in Syria came in April 2014. It resulted in the late King Abdullah firing Bandar as head of the Saudi intelligence agency and putting Mohammed in charge of Syrian policy instead. That decision brought Saudi Arabia and the Obama administration closer together on at least one outstanding bone of contention between the two partners.

Ironically, both Bandar, 65, and Mohammed, 55, are regarded as security "hawks" within the ruling al-Saud family. Both, too, have played pivotal roles at different times in cementing the U.S.-Saudi relationship and navigating it through periods of extreme tension over conflicting policy goals toward Iraq, Syria, and Iran.

President Obama and his security advisors had been treating Mohammed like the heir apparent ever since he was installed as interior minister in 2012. They rolled out the red carpet to the White House, Pentagon, and State Department on his visits to Washington in early 2013 and again in December 2014. He is held in high regard not only because he crushed al-Qaeda activities inside kingdom in the mid-2000s, but because he also devised the kingdom's innovative approach toward the handling of 2,800 suspected or convicted terrorists sent to "rehabilitation centers" and helped to find jobs, homes, and even wives after their release.

Mohammed's repeated successes in the Saudis' own war on terrorism made him Washington's favorite among the grandsons of the kingdom's founding father, King Abdulaziz al-Saud, who died in 1953. When he might come to power still remains unclear but certainly not right away. Abdulaziz sired 36 sons including the new monarch, King Salman, who is 79, while his half-brother and the new crown prince, Muqrin, is ten years younger. But Mohammed is now clearly the choice of the ruling House of Saud to become the first king from among Abdulaziz's grandsons.

As the family's supreme counter-terrorist strategist, Mohammed probably viewed Bandar's Syria strategy launched in mid-2013 as highly risky right from the start. It was aimed at countering the rising influence of the even more extremist al-Qaeda organization which has given birth to both Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and the Islamic State now in control of western Iraq and most of northern Syria.

In September 2013, Bandar engineered the merger of dozens of local Islamic rebel militias into one Army of Islam ("Jaysh al-Islam") under the leadership of Zahran Alloush, who already led the main Saudi-backed Liwa al-Islam ("Brigade of Islam"). His father, Sheik Abdullah Alloush, is a conservative preacher educated in Saudi Arabia, whom Syrian authorities jailed and then released right after the uprising began in early 2011.

Bandar advocated arming this "army" with manpads, hand-launched missiles capable of shooting down Syrian government planes and helicopters. In effect, he supported what the Reagan administration had done in the late 1980s when it decided to supply U.S. Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Islamic militants in Afghanistan fighting the Soviet occupation there. The Obama administration, however, was dead against this, fearing the arms would fall into the hands of anti-American and anti-Israeli Islamic radicals. Also, the Army of Islam refused to join the U.S.-supported "moderate" Free Syrian Army.

This "army" has been most active in the Damascus suburbs of Ghouta and Douma, which have held out against all efforts by the Syrian army to bomb, besiege, and starve its fighters into submission. But it has a limited presence elsewhere and never emerged as a credible alternative either to the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra.

Even before the Mohammed-Bandar showdown over Syria, the two princes were at odds over their respective security and intelligence responsibilities. Then, Bandar's standing with King Abdullah began slipping due to his prolonged absences from the kingdom for medical treatment, mostly in the United States. Such behavior was not uncommon even during his storied career as ambassador to the United States for 23 years until 2005. It became even more noticeable afterwards while he headed the National Security Council (NSC) and Saudi intelligence service.

Bandar lost his last post in government on January 29, 2015 when King Salman fired him as secretary-general of the National Security Council. The new king went even further in disgracing him by dissolving his NSC altogether and replacing it with a new Council of Political and Security Affairs led by his chief adversary, Prince Mohammed.

It is unclear precisely when Mohammed began maneuvering to displace Bandar as the chief Saudi strategist on Syria. What is known is that on January 3, 2014, the Saudi government published a stiff anti-terrorism decree criminalizing all forms of Saudi support for jihad abroad that bore Mohammed's fingerprints. The Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing even extended the notion of "terrorism" to any actions at home that "harms public order," "insults the reputation of the state," or "shakes the security of society."

This decree was followed by another on February 3 that even more specifically criminalized "participating in hostilities outside the kingdom." Four days later, Mohammed's Interior

Ministry came out with a list of groups deemed “terrorists” that included the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen; the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood; and even Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen. However, Bandar’s Army of Islam was not included in the list.

Still, Mohammed’s overriding concern about blowback from Saudi support for Islamic fundamentalist rebels coming from, and then returning to, the kingdom was clearly becoming the dominant one for King Abdullah as well. The Interior Ministry has documented the cases of 1,900 Saudis who have gone abroad to fight in Syria and Iraq, 774 of whom had already returned home as of last September.

Prince Mohammed seems to regard peaceful human and political rights activists at home as almost as dangerous as Islamic extremists abroad. Take the case of Waleed Abu al-Khair, a lawyer who dared to run a human rights monitoring group without government authorization. On April 15, 2014, the same day Bandar was relieved of his duties as head of intelligence and chief Syria strategist, the government re-arrested Abu al-Khair while he was appearing in court in Jeddah to appeal a relatively light three-month jail sentence.

Abu al-Khair was sent for retrial under the new anti-terrorism law before a Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh, which is under the Justice Ministry but of the same mindset as Mohammed’s Interior Ministry. There, the sentence meted out to him was far worse. First he was sentenced to 15 years in prison, with five years suspended, plus a 15-year travel ban and \$53,000 fine. However, the government prosecutor objected to the court’s “leniency,” and on January 15, 2015 the court ordered him to serve the full 15 years in jail.



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