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General in the Room: Trump Names Abizaid Ambassador to Saudi Arabia

Washington signals a renewed commitment to Riyadh at a time when ties to the kingdom and its crown prince are under intense scrutiny

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Global Research, November 15, 2018
Asia Times 14 November 2018

Region: USA
Theme: History

President Donald Trump has announced his intent to nominate retired general John Abizaid as US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, marking the end of a nearly two-year vacancy, the White House said.

As America's longest-serving Central Command chief, Abizaid oversaw the Iraq War from 2003 to 2007. The West Point graduate, who according to The New York Times twice declined the diplomatic post, will now be competing with a longstanding backchannel between Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Abizaid, who is of Lebanese descent and speaks Arabic, will bring an experienced hand to the relationship with Riyadh at a volatile time.

The bet by Kushner, a real estate developer, on Saudi Arabia's brash young crown prince, has come under intense scrutiny following the murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2.

In the wake of the killing, initially brushed off as a disappearance by the Saudis, Turkey leaked a string of gruesome pieces of evidence suggesting otherwise and played an audio recording of the murder to the head of the CIA.

In the recording, a member of the Saudi hit squad says, "tell your boss," the NYT reported Monday, citing US intelligence officials pointing to the crown prince as the presumed boss who could have ordered such an act inside a Saudi diplomatic mission.

The Saudis, who were forced to admit to the murder, have nonetheless maintained that the crown prince had no knowledge of the incident.

The murder, a sloppy attempt at a coverup, and Turkish ascendence to renewed regional leadership have hurt US efforts to isolate rival Iran. After threatening that not one liter of Iranian oil would be sold after the imposition of sanctions on November 5, the US was compelled to grant waivers to a number of countries — including Turkey.

The Saudi crown prince, promoted as the lynchpin of a grand new Middle East strategy by Kushner, has since had to lean heavily on his father's influence to ride out the crisis and calm allies. The king and his heir recently wrapped up a domestic tour seemingly aimed at presenting a united front.

Trump's appointment of a seasoned military man and Council on Foreign Relations member as envoy to Saudi Arabia after a 22-month vacancy may signal a shift — at least officially — away from the Kushner-MBS bromance.

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