



Saudi Succession: The Sudayris Return

by Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The passing of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and the smooth accession of King Salman creates an interesting development in the Saudi monarchy. It marks the return of the Sudayri family to leadership and the eventual rise of the grandchildren of founder King Abd al-Aziz. King Salman and his country face some serious challenges in the future, including nuclear Iran and the presence of the Islamic State on its doorstep. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia enjoys a solid relationship with the US and a successful oil-based economy, which is likely to ensure continued stability.

Saudi Arabia is the country to which 1.7 billion Muslims turn five times daily in prayer and is the world's largest exporter of oil. So it is no wonder that stock markets shuddered, the depressed price of oil took an uptick, US President Barack Obama cut short a trip to India to fly to Riyadh, and flags were lowered to half mast in Britain, when it was announced on January 23 that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had died.

For, many years now Saudi successions have gone smoothly, and there is no reason to suspect that this time it will be any different. Saudi royals know that a succession struggle will only hurt them, and Saudi princes do not want to destroy the cash cow which is Saudi Arabia, one of only two countries in the world named after a family (the other is the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan).

Those concerned about stability can rest assured that the succession will be smooth and that the Saudi ship of state will continue to successfully navigate the seas of Middle Eastern politics, just as it has for over a hundred years.

True, the challenges faced by King Abdullah will continue under the new King, Salman, but the royal family has proved itself quite adept at handling what politics throws its way.

Sudayris Rising

Two interesting developments have come out of the latest succession: The return of the “Sudayri Seven” and the move, finally, to the grandchildren of founder King Abd al-Aziz, with the appointment of Prince Muhammad bin Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz to the position of deputy crown prince.

One cannot understand royal family politics without a short course in Saudi royal factions. The founding monarch Abd al-Aziz has dozens of sons. These formed into tribe-like factions based on a shared mother. The most important faction to emerge was that of the seven sons of Hasa bint Ahmad al-Sudayri. This faction produced two kings, King Fahd (d. 2005) and the new King Salman, as well as the long-serving minister of the interior, Prince Nayif (d. 2012) and the even longer serving defense minister Prince Sultan (d. 2011). This faction of full brothers operates as a group against contenders, but can be at odds internally when they vie for positions.

The recently deceased King Abdullah had no full brothers. But his half brother King Faysal (d. 1975) was wise enough to establish the principle of balancing between royal factions. This principle has been applied more or less since King Faysal’s death. Yet although there is a general respect in the family for the principle of balance, this does not prevent the maneuvering and advancing factional interests.

During his tenure, Abdullah was keen to advance his sons to positions of power from which they would gain the experience and prestige needed to be viable candidates for the throne. Thus, his son Prince Mit’ib was advanced to head the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), which King Abdullah had previously led and which constituted, essentially, the private militia of Abdullah’s family faction set by King Faysal to balance the Sudayri-controlled ministry of defense. With respect to the SANG itself, Abdullah has made sure over the past few years to increase its ability to carry out more complex missions by increased training and arms purchases. Mit’ib now heads a formidable force.

Abdullah placed his son Prince Turki as governor of Riyadh Province in May 2014, a powerful position held for decades by the current King Salman. Another son, Prince Mish'al, was made governor of the holy city of Mecca in December 2013.

While alive, Sudayri minister of interior Prince Nayif and his son Prince Muhammad, fought and defeated al-Qa'ida in Saudi Arabia, and presided over the development of a considerable oil installation protection force to augment the already formidable internal security and intelligence forces at his disposal.

Now, although Abdullah was advancing his sons, he had to respect the principle of balance. Thus, his crown princes were all from the rival Sudayri faction. The first two Sultan and Nayif died in quick succession. His last crown prince, Salman, is now King. But to secure that position, Salman and his Sudayri kin had to agree the appointment of the capable Prince Muqrin as deputy crown prince. Muqrin (a former head of intelligence), is one of the few remaining sons of founder Abd al-Aziz and is without any full brothers. This was also a compromise for Abdullah, who would have preferred to have one of his own sons in the on-deck crown prince spot. Muqrin is now crown prince.

Salman's succession was never doubted and signified the return of the Sudayris. Yet he is infirm and advanced in years. While Muqrin will succeed Salman, Muqrin has no sons who have the exposure, prestige and experience to make a run for a top post. Therefore, when Salman assumed the throne he did not disappoint his fellow Sudayris. He removed Abdullah's allies and sons from important positions and put the Sudayris back up top. Most importantly, he moved Sudayri Prince Muhammad bin Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz to the position of deputy crown prince, thus making an end run-around Muqrin and assuring Sudayri primacy for many years, as the grandsons of founder King Abd al-Aziz take power. Indeed, the Sudayris may be hoping that they can dominate Muqrin just as they dominated the weak King Khalid, who succeeded King Faysal.

King Salman's immediate appointment makes crystal clear how King Abdallah's kin and supporters were sidelined and the Sudayris were given a leg up. The appointment of 55 year old Prince Muhammad bin Nayif as deputy crown prince, deputy prime minister and his reappointment as

minister of interior (which he has been since 2012) proves this. Prince Muhammad is western educated, speaks English, and is widely credited with the crushing of al-Qa'ida in the kingdom. He reportedly survived four al-Qa'ida assassination attempts. He is the man of the hour and will likely work with his Sudayri kinsmen to limit crown prince Muqrin when he becomes king.

Minister of defense King Salman chose his son Prince Muhammad (30) to take the post he himself had previously held, thus solidifying the control of Salman and his family over the fellow Sudayri rivals for that coveted post (previously held by the Sudayri Prince Sultan). He also made him Chief of the Royal Court and Private Advisor to the King, and removed Khalid bin Abd al-Aziz al-Tuwayji from those positions. The Tuwayjris are an important Najdi family long associated with the deceased King Abdullah and his son Mit'ib. Thus, his removal is further aimed at taking Prince Mit'ib down a notch. Mit'ib and his brothers still hold powerful positions and cannot be entirely dismissed. But they have been dealt a harsh blow.

Looking Forward: Saudi Arabia and Home and Abroad

Salman himself is an accomplished royal family player, but he is 70 years old and infirm. The Sudayris probably look upon the senior Prince Muqrin as capable, but only as a placeholder until Muhammad bin Nayif ascends the throne. Prince Muhammad bin Nayif is well prepared to deal with the challenge of counter-terrorism. In general, the grandsons of Abd al-Aziz can be expected to be more forward looking and open to change than their fathers.

Saudi Arabia, led by King Salman, faces some serious challenges in the years ahead. But there is no indication that the royal family will be any less capable of handling these issues. Internally, the Kingdom was an island of stability as it faced down the Arab uprisings of 2011-2012 through a combination of persuasion and increased spending. But mostly it could rely on the Saudi population that is not highly politicized and knows how good their situation is compared to their neighbors who are going up in flames. Still, the younger generation is less compliant, more globalized, and takes for granted the huge strides of the past half-century that turned Saudi Arabia from a poor desert backwater that begged for US loans into an economic juggernaut. Some are attracted to ISIS and al-Qa'ida, while others question the lack of democracy in

their country. Nevertheless, any opposition that may result is too diffuse and disorganized to present any real challenge in the near future.

In the region, the Kingdom is still navigating stormy seas caused by the Iranian challenge, which it shares with Israel. In the south Iranian-backed Houthi rebels have recently ousted the regime of President Abd Rabbuh Hadi who was backed by Washington and Riyadh for his cooperation in fighting al-Qa'ida. To the east, Shiite-majority, Sunni-ruled Bahrain is under threat from the Iranian-supported opposition. In the north, an Iranian-backed Shiite-led Iraq further surrounds the Kingdom with enemies. The Shiite domination of Iraq has given a boost to the Islamic State, which attracts young Saudi recruits. The Islamic State is also active in Syria, struggling against the pro-Iranian regime of Bashar al-Asad. And of course, most importantly, as Iran moves steadily towards obtaining nuclear weapons, Riyadh can only hope, along with Israel, that the United States will come to its senses and put a stop to Iran's progress.

Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States is still on a solid foundation, despite Saudi disappointment with the Obama Administration. The two countries are linked by defense arrangements and sales in the many billions of dollars for years to come. And they need each other. Shocked by the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Saudis now play a moderating role against Islamists, whether they are the Muslim Brotherhood or the radical jihadis of ISIS. Saudi Arabia shares intelligence with the US, which can carry out military operations of which the Saudis can only dream of. And they do dream. Riyadh has hopes of becoming an independent regional power over the coming decades, somewhat like Israel. That means, an ally of the US, but capable of projecting military force when deemed necessary and without US tactical aid or consent. It is reasonable to expect that the reported covert Saudi cooperation with Israel regarding Iran is likely to continue as well.

Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum, a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Bar-Ilan University. He is an expert on the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia.

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