

Succession in Saudi Arabia

Policy Brief

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Ramy Jabbour

Office of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, one of the most influential Arab and Islamic countries, is facing internal and external challenges that may affect the stability of the country and the future of the Saudi throne. These threats can be marked by the instability in the neighboring states such as Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain due to the Iranian role and the rise of Islamic and Jihadi movements. Saudi's internal situation is also afflicted by the Iranian role in the region and in KSA by the support given to the Shiite awakening in Eastern Province (Al Qatif) in addition to Iranian alliance and the Houthis' rebels in Yemen. In addition, the rise of Islamic movements in KSA (Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Sahwa's), and the increasing power of ISIS in the region and KSA represent the biggest danger to the future of the Saudi. On the other hand, the succession crisis can be determined as a key issue in the future of the Saudi's in KSA. Two important questions remain about who will succeed King Abdullah and Prince Salman, and how the different wings in Al Saud family may influence the future of the Saudi Kingdom.

King Abdullah and Prince Salman's Health

The official announcement that King Abdullah had been taken into a Riyadh hospital "to undergo some medical checkups" suggests serious concern about the health of the ninety-one-year-old monarch because he is assumed to have excellent medical facilities in his own palaces. Theoretically, his successor would be his half-brother Crown Prince Salman, who is seventy-eight year old. Despite the appearance of strength given by a heavy public schedule of meetings, Salman's brain is evidently ravaged by dementia. Visitors report that after a few minutes of conversation, he becomes incoherent. Salman's frequent presence in public is attributed to his determination to become King in addition to the ambition of his closest relatives that he should do so.¹

Prince Muqrin's Appointment and the Succession Struggle

On 27 March 2014, Prince Muqrin was appointed as a deputy crown prince. The appointment of Prince Muqrin had stirred the competition and waged the royal tongues behind the closed doors of the Kingdom. One of the opposing ideas to Muqrin's appointment is his family status as a son of a Yemeni concubine who was never formally married to his father. The appointment contrasts one of the characteristics that Ibn Saud stated concerning any future King²

Ibn Saud supposedly said that a king should not be the child of a foreigner³. But the main factor opposing this appointment rely to their question about the validity of his newly created title (deputy crown prince). This newly created title can be understood as part of inner struggle between the princes regarding the future of the Saudi Kingdom. Prince Muqrin, can be a choice in this position due to the poor health of Salman, suffering a form of dementia. Moreover, the naming of Muqrin Ibn Saud's youngest children, skipped over at least two other brothers upsetting the unspoken rule that the succession passes down according to age. King Abdullah's appointment to Muqrin can be interpreted as a move to secure the future of his own sons once the succession passes to the next generation. Muqrin, who lacks important tribal connections or an influential position, will be beholden; the theory goes, to Abdullah's sons, notably his favorite, Mithab, who heads the National Guard. One of the Saudi officials rejecting the step taken by King Abdullah stated that Muqrin's appointment was against Islam and against the whole history of Saudi Arabia. There is no such thing as a deputy crown prince.⁴

Prince Khaled Bin Talal and Prince Saud Bin Sayf declared their support for Prince Ahmad as a future King. They accused Khalid Al- Tuwajiri (Royal Court Chief) for lobbying to dismiss Prince Ahmad as the interior minister. Prince Saud Bin Sayf stated that the appointment of Prince Salman and Prince Muqrin as crown prince and deputy crown prince respectively was without the approval of the allegiance commission. Saud Bin Sayf threatened Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah and warned him from conspiring with Al Tuwajiri against the rest of the family⁵. The appointment of Prince Muqrin adding to it the accusation statements by Khaled Bin Bandar and Saud Bin Sayf Al Nasr can reflect the power struggle between the different wings of Al Saud family especially between the Saudairi's wing (Prince Salman, Prince Ahmad, Prince Mohammad Bin Nayef..) and King Abdullah's wing and others. This struggle may determine the succession of King Abdullah and the third generation competition for power.

The Succession and The Next Generation Struggle

As a result of the increasing age of the ruling generation, it was decided as early as 1992, in the Basic Law of Governance promulgate by then King Fahd, that a successor could also be selected from among the "descendants" of Ibn Saud's sons. Although such an appointment has yet to occur, the age and lack of experience of the remaining living sons of Saudi Arabia's founder suggests that the throne must be passed to the next generation. One of the next

generation candidates is Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. He was appointed to the crucial position of minister of the interior which places him in a critical position which had, until now, only been held by the current ruling generation. Prince Mohammed's appointment could accelerate the rise of the next generation of leaders to positions of real power in the Kingdom, including the kingship. Another option may be King Abdullah's son, Mitab, the Minister of the National Guard. Prince Mitab is playing a major role in the decision making process in KSA in addition to several important visits to many foreign countries⁶. As some resources claim, King Abdullah and Prince Mitab are playing all their cards to make sure that Mitab would be the first King of the third generation. The sources claim that Mitab is trying to control the elite forces of the Saudi army alongside to the National Guard to face any attempt to prevent him from his inauguration as the future Saudi King. Also these sources claim the role of Khalid Al Tuwajiri in using lobby institutions to destroy Mohammad Bin Nayef image in USA. While on the other hand, these lobby institutions will show Mitab as an appropriate partner with USA as a future king. An article was written in Washington times translated into Arabic explain that Mitab is against extremism and can be a future partner with USA⁷. On the other hand, sources claimed that Mohammad bin Nayef was a supporter for the Cassidian deal between KSA and Germany. Although Mohammad bin Salman was accused to be bribed from the German company, Mohammad Bin Nayef accepted this deal. Sources said that Mohammad position was an approach toward Mohammad bin Salman in order for the latter support to Mohammad Bin Nayef in the future.⁸

Future Scenarios for the Future

There are several scenarios for the future of the Saudi throne. Theoretically, Crown Prince Salman would become the King and the deputy crown prince Muqrin would become the crown prince. Mohammad Bin Salam will most probably become the defense minister replacing his father. If a deal was reached between the different wings of Al Saud family, Mutaib bin Abduallah would become the deputy crown prince. Another scenario may occur if the King's health will improve, then he could resign and dismiss crown prince Salman for health reasons. This will lead Muqrin to become the King of Saudi Arabia with a high possibility for Mutaib to become the Crown King.

References

¹ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-king-in-hospital-succession-crisis-looms>

² http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/appointment-of-deputy-heir-to-throne-stirs-controversy-in-saudi-arabia/2014/05/26/1397be64-53cd-4a9c-b3f9-78c904abee92_story.html

³ Policy Focus, Henderson, Washington Institute

⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/appointment-of-deputy-heir-to-throne-stirs-controversy-in-saudi-arabia/2014/05/26/1397be64-53cd-4a9c-b3f9-78c904abee92_story.html

⁵ <https://www.watan.com/reports/3721>

⁶ <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/long-lives-the-king-7820?page=2>

⁷ <http://www.thenewkhalij.com/ar/node/7169>

⁸ <http://www.intelligenceonline.com/corporate-intelligence/the-red-line/2014/12/10/munich-prosecutor-exposes-cassidian-s-contacts,108052002-ART>.