

## **Challenges of the Young Saudi Leadership**

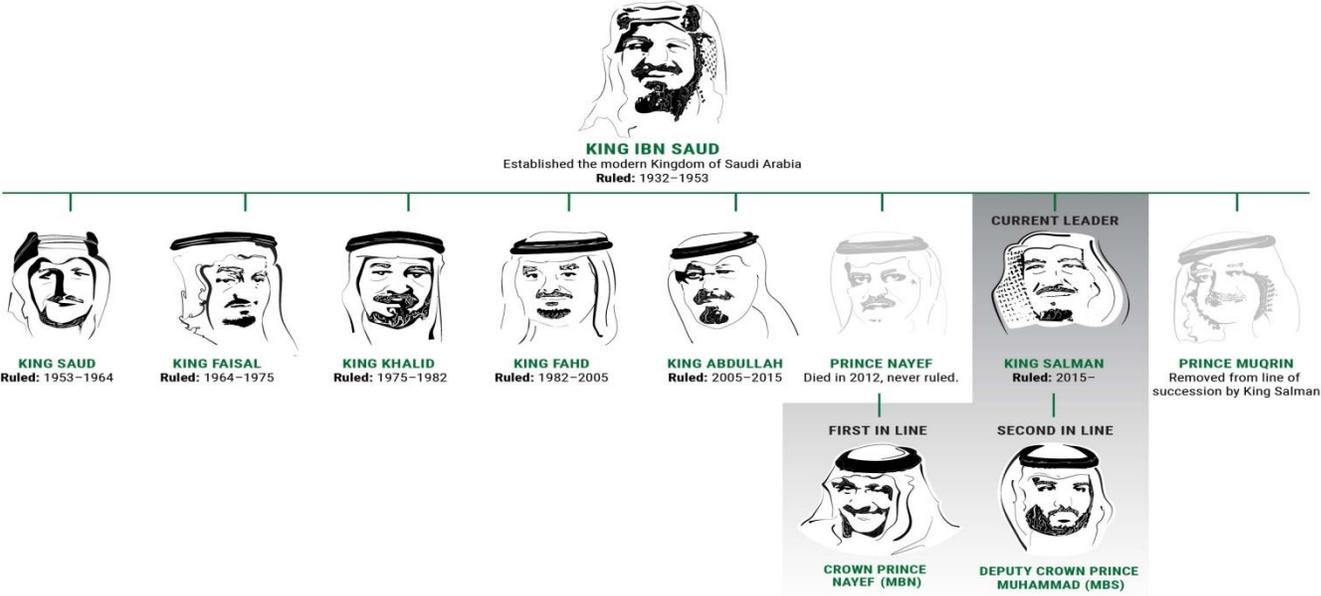
**October 2015**

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Less than 4 months after his ascendance to the throne, King Salman instigated remarkable changes that will affect the future of Saudi Arabia. The King decided to consolidate the power around the next generation of leaders by appointing Muhammad Bin Nayef (MBN) as a crown prince instead prince Muqrin, who was asked to step down. Moreover, his son Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), was appointed deputy crown prince and therefore second in line to the throne. These changes took place in a very critical situation with the Kingdom facing several internal and external challenges with advanced age and waning health of the king. The young Saudi leadership are expected to play a major role in facing the economic turn down and the foreign threats in addition to prove their leadership qualities and capabilities in managing the internal affairs of their royal family and the domestic concerns of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.



## The Two Mohammad's

### Mohammad Bin Salman: A Fast Rise to Power

The 30 year old prince, Mohammad Bin Salman entered politics as a special advisor to his father Prince Salman who was the governor of Riyadh Province on the December 15, 2009. At the time, the prince started to gather titles and positions such as secretary-general of the Riyadh Competitive Council, special advisor to the chairman of the Board for the King Abdul-Aziz Foundation for Research and Archives, and member of the Board of Trustees for Albir Society in

Riyadh region<sup>1</sup>. Prince Mohammad remained his father's personal advisor when Prince Salman began his ascent to power by becoming Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister in November 2011 and then crown prince in 2012. On 25 April 2014 Prince Mohammad was appointed state minister. On 23 January 2015, King Abdullah died, and Salman took the throne. King Salman appointed his son first as minister of defense and as the Secretary General of the Royal Court. Six days later, on 29 January 2015 Prince Mohammad was named the chair of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs which was established on the same date and eventually became the deputy crown prince on 29 April 2015.<sup>2</sup>



### **Mohammad Bin Nayef: A Possible Future King**

After studying in Oregon, Mohammad Bin Nayef (MBN) spent several years with the FBI and Scotland Yard. Muhammad bin Nayef was appointed assistant to his father Prince Nayef, minister for security affairs in 1999. On 5 November 2012, King Abdullah issued a royal decree and dismissed Prince Ahmed, minister of interior, from his office and appointed Prince Muhammad as minister. Prince Mohammad led the campaign against al- Qaida inside the

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<sup>1</sup> Eng.alarabiya.net, (2015), Profile: Prince Mohammad Bin Salman bin Abdul-Aziz/ *Al Arabiya*. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/profiles/2015/01/27/Profile-Prince-Mohammed-bin-Salman-bin-Abdulaziz-Al-Saud.html>

<sup>2</sup>Susris.com, (2015). *Prince Mohammed bin Salman | SUSRIS*. <http://susris.com/officials/prince-mohammed-bin-salman/>

kingdom between 2003 and 2006 and faced one of the most violent challenges to the house of Saud. He escaped several assassination attempts by al-Qaida. Muhammad Bin Nayef has excelled in the job. In the process, MBN who became a favorite friend for USA in his country was appointed as the deputy crown prince after the death of King Abdullah. On April 29 2015, he was appointed as crown prince and replaced Prince Muqrin.<sup>3</sup>



## **KSA's Security Challenges**

When identifying the security challenges facing the new KSA leadership, Sunni extremism represented by ISIS can be described as the most dangerous threat to the stability of the kingdom. ISIS claimed its responsibility for series of attacks against Shiite mosques in the Eastern province and other minor attacks against foreigners and security forces. The fact that Saudi nationals constitute the majority of the arrested militants and perpetrators of domestic militant attacks displays that the country's main threat is from radicalized locals. To mention few examples, twenty-six members of ISIS were arrested for being accused for forming a "terrorist cell" tied to the Qatif bombing. Similarly, the majority of the terrorists arrested in April were

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<sup>3</sup>Riedel, B. (2015). *Saudi Arabia's crown prince: The epitome of counterterrorism in the Middle East*. *The Brookings Institution*. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2015/the-prince-of-counterterrorism>

Saudis. In December, of 135 announced arrests, 109 were Saudi nationals. The three individuals tied to ISIS who were arrested in connection to the November 20 shooting of a Danish national were Saudis, and seventy-three of seventy-seven arrested for involvement in the November 3 shooting of Shiites were also Saudi citizens<sup>4</sup>. ISIS threat to Saudi Arabia may increase in the future especially if the Saudi militants linked to the terrorist organization in Syria and Iraq will return to their country. In attacking Shiite mosques, ISIS is raising sectarian tension to a country with an already oppressed Shiite minority which might over-react against the government.<sup>5</sup> Eyes are focused on the youth leadership to overcome this challenge especially MBN due to his previous success in the de-radicalization programs and his anti-terrorism tactics. His essential future role was best described by the director of Brookings intelligence, Bruce Riedel by stating that Bin Nayef has already had more responsibility than any Saudi of his generation, and his burden is likely to become heavier given the chaos in the post-Arab Spring Middle East<sup>6</sup>. The new generation, asked to initiate reform programs to prevent additional rise of sectarianism may confront the hardliner Wahhabi school that legitimizes Al Saud's rule in KSA which possibly will affect the stability of the Kingdom.

## **The Economic Test**

The key factor of KSA's political and economic importance in the region; in addition to its Islamic symbolism and its Wahhabi ideology, can be traced to the fact of being the biggest oil exporter in the world. The recent decrease of oil prices in the market can be identified as a test for KSA's economic sustainability. Saudi Arabia's international reserves shrank to 669\$ billion from almost 750\$ billion in the last year due to the high decrease of the barrel of oil price adding to it the high cost of war in Yemen. The Saudi-led OPEC strategy to defend market share regardless of price appears to be costly for KSA's economy. Saudi Arabia has spent the past ten months safeguarding its share of the global oil market, increasing its own crude production to

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<sup>4</sup>Goldman, M. (2015). The Who, What, and Why of ISIS' Bombings in Saudi Arabia. *The National Interest*.<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-who-what-why-isis-bombings-saudi-arabia-13047?page=2>

<sup>5</sup>Browning, N. (2015). Saudi Arabia is on edge after ISIS suicide bombing. *Reuters*.<http://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-is-on-edge-after-isis-suicide-bombing-2015-5>

<sup>6</sup>Riedel, B. (2015). The Prince of Counter Terrorism. *The Brookings Essay* .<http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2015/the-princeof-counter-terrorism?cid=00900020020080101US0001>

record highs. Although the kingdom is certainly running through its foreign currency reserves, some analysts think that Saudi's government is willing to teach investors in U.S. shale that as soon as they invest more money into the sector, they, the Saudis, will boost output and drive prices lower, ruining the economic models on which the investment decision was based<sup>7</sup>. Other researchers mention that KSA is safeguarding its share to affect economically its strategic opponent Iran.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the "shale war", MBS, in charge of the oil portfolio and the chair of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs in the Kingdom will lead a vision to draw a future economic strategy for his country. It is an upcoming test for the young prince to preserve the "social contract" between House of Saud and the Saudi citizens by protecting his rentier state.

## Offensive Foreign Policy

It may be noticed that the rise of extremism represented by ISIS and the Iranian role in the region are the two main regional threats for the Saudi Kingdom. In addition, the continuity of KSA's strategic alliance to the US is at stake especially after the US-Iranian deal. Since King Salman ascended the Saudi throne, it was remarkably understood that the Saudi's departed from behind-the-scene diplomacy practiced in ending the Lebanese civil war in the 1990 and leading a reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine to an offensive foreign policy noticed in their military campaign in Yemen and their increase support to the Syrian opposition<sup>9</sup>. Saudi Arabia's engagement and their victories, though slow and at a high-cost, in Yemen is a clear warning for Iran to stop its involvement in the "Arab Affairs". Riyadh felt threatened and besieged by the Iranian expansion in the region through Tehran's supported militias in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Moreover, the presence of the Shiite community in the oil-rich Eastern province of the Kingdom and their relation to Iran remains an alarming danger for the ruling family. Another message was clearly sent to USA through Saudi offensive and active foreign policy.

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<sup>7</sup>Bershidsky, L. (2015). Saudis Are Winning the War on Shale. *Bloomberg View*.

<http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-09-11/saudis-are-winning-the-war-on-shale>

<sup>8</sup>It will take much cheaper oil for Saudi Arabia to take action. (2015). *The Economist*.

<http://www.economist.com/news/finance-economics/21662570-kingdom-can-stand-more-pain-it-will-take-much-cheaper-oil-saudi-arabia-take-action>

<sup>9</sup>Cunningham, E., & Murphy, B. (2015). How Saudi Arabia's 79-year-old King Salman is shaking up the Middle East. *The Washington Post*.[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/how-saudi-arabias-79-year-old-king-salman-is-shaking-up-the-middle-east/2015/06/01/eed3e128-fb1a-11e4-a47c-e56f4db884ed\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/how-saudi-arabias-79-year-old-king-salman-is-shaking-up-the-middle-east/2015/06/01/eed3e128-fb1a-11e4-a47c-e56f4db884ed_story.html)

This message was best described by the political analyst Fahad Nazar indicating that “ Saudi Arabia still considers the United States to be a valuable partner, going forward, it will take whatever measures necessary to guarantee its own security, with minimal consultation if necessary, should the United States prove unable or unwilling to do so.”<sup>10</sup> It is obvious that the young Saudi leadership has to play a big role in confronting the foreign threats and challenges to their country. A decisive victory in Yemen will be a difficult mission to MBS for safeguarding his image as a national hero. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the repositioning of AQAP (Al Qaeda in Arab Peninsula) in the Hadramowt southern province of Yemen are two mounting problems to be solved by the young prince. In addition, MBS has a major role in developing KSA’s relations with several countries like Russia, China, and France while in parallel to decrease the Kingdom dependency on USA. On the other hand, MBN described as the prince of counter-terrorism and the US friend in Riyadh,<sup>11</sup> may use his leadership capabilities and connections to preserve the Kingdom strategic alliance with USA. The youth leaders are positioned in a historic phase which their Kingdom became the forefront of the Arab and the Sunni world in confronting the Shiite expansionist Iran. The fall of Iraq and Syria into failed states adding to the internal conflicts in Egypt placed Saudi Arabia as the only remaining Arab influential state in the MENA region.

## **Urgent Letter**

The internal relation between the princes of Al Saud might be the biggest challenge for the next royal generation to guide their country. The intra-house conflict between the royals during the second Saudi state led the Rashidis opponents to defeat them in 1891 ending their rule. Since the formation of the third Saudi state by Abdul Aziz Al Saud, KSA’s throne had been passed among Abdul Aziz’s sons. In order of their accession to the throne, Saud was born around 1902, Faisal 1906, Khalid 1913, Fahd 1921, Abdullah 1924, and Salman 1935. Saud and Faisal were in their 50s when they took power, Khalid and Fahd were in their 60s, and Abdullah and Salman were in their 70s. Unsurprisingly, age has been seen as a “preeminent qualification” in determining the

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<sup>10</sup>Nazer, F. (2015). Revealed: Saudi Arabia's Plan to Transform the Middle East. *The National Interest*.<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/revealed-saudi-arabias-plan-transform-the-middle-east-12514?page=2>

<sup>11</sup>Riedel, B. (2015). The Prince of Counter Terrorism. *The Brookings Essay*.  
<http://www.brookings.edu/research/essays/2015/the-prince-of-counterterrorism>

order of ascending to the throne, according to Henderson's 1994 study and repeated in his 2009 "After Abdullah."<sup>12</sup> King Salman appointments of a crown prince and a deputy crown prince are steps that contradict the previous traditions in succession rule. The Kingdom generational shift despite 13 of Abdul-Aziz's sons still being alive may become the source of much debate among royals. For instance, an anonymous grandson of the late King Abdul-Aziz Ibn Saud wrote a four-page letter calling on the royal family to hold an emergency meeting to address concerns that the House of Saud may be losing its hold on power. The letter mentioned that KSA is facing financial and military challenges in addition to corruption pointing out that a change from the top may be needed to safeguard the house of Saud rule<sup>13</sup>. MEE sources claimed that the real story behind this letter is that it is a preparation for [King Salman's brother] Ahmed bin Abdul-Aziz to be pushed towards power<sup>14</sup>. Prince Ahmad is the youngest member of the powerful Sudairi brothers who served as deputy interior minister and an interior minister from June 18 2012 till the November 5 2012. Adding to this letter, the 35 years old Prince Saud Bin Sayf Al Nasr-grandson of King Saud-accused, through his official twitter account, MBS of being a corrupt and reckless leader in an incidence that signifies the inner resentment in the house of Al Saud toward the generational shift; and especially toward Mohammad Bin Salman.

## **MBS vs MBN**

Within four months of his coronation, King Salman has put Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in charge of the state oil monopoly, the public investment company, economic policy and the ministry of defense. In addition, according to an aide to Prince Mutaib and Western diplomats, MBS is expected to take over the National Guard from his cousin Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah.<sup>15</sup> Following MBS several visits to foreign countries representing his father, many sources pointed

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<sup>12</sup>Roberts, D. (2015). Breaking the Saudi rules of succession. *The Washington Post*.<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/27/breaking-the-saudi-rules-of-succession/>

<sup>13</sup>Saudi royal calls for regime change in Riyadh. (2015). *The Guardian*.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/28/saudi-royal-calls-regime-change-letters-leadership-king-salman>

<sup>14</sup> Donaghy, R. (2015). Senior Saudi royal urges leadership change for fear of monarchy collapse <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-senior-royal-urges-change-amid-fears-monarchy-collapse-1612130905>

<sup>15</sup>KIRKPATRICK, D. (2015). Surprising Saudi Rises as a Prince Among Princes. *The New York Times*.[http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/world/middleeast/surprising-saudi-rises-as-a-prince-among-princes.html?\\_r=1&referrer=](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/world/middleeast/surprising-saudi-rises-as-a-prince-among-princes.html?_r=1&referrer=)

for a potential succession rivalry between MBS and MBN<sup>16</sup> while others believed that the deputy crown prince will move to make himself heir to the throne. Prince Salman benefited from his father's ascendance to the throne to increase his influence in the decision making process. King Salman's latest decision, exempting minister of state Saad Al Jabri a personality close to MBN, was perceived as an MBS move to weaken Bin Nayef's influence inside the government.<sup>17</sup>

The young Saudi leaders surely face security threats and a challenging regional competition represented by Iran. The latest Hajj incident in Mecca will increase the tension between KSA and Iran. ISIS and AQAP will not miss any opportunity to shake the kingdom's security increasing the Sunni-Shiite tension placing MBN's credibility at stake. In the present time, Saudi Arabia may sustain economically due to the government's big reserves, but in the near future, MBS must put together and implement a clear strategy to protect KSA's economy and to achieve the aspirations of the Saudi youth and face the increased percentage of unemployment. It is noticed that the struggle in Al Saud family changed from a rivalry between the Sudairi's clan and Abdullah's clan to a possible intra-struggle between the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation (Prince Ahmad and others) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of Princes (mostly MBS and MBN) or an inner 3<sup>rd</sup> generation competition between the two Mohammads and other contenders like Mutaib Bin Abdullah. The Saud family should definitely work to set aside their inner problems and be united to face different existential threats. Future research could follow these challenges and see if they will cause any serious damage to the Al-Saud rule and potentially threaten their third kingdom as what happened to the first two, or will the royal family succeed one more time to re-invent and overcome all challenges.

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<sup>16</sup>Ignatius, D. (2015). The son who would be the Saudis' king?. *The Washington Post*.[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-son-who-would-be-the-saudis-king/2015/09/08/06e94328-566c-11e5-8bb1-b488d231bba2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-son-who-would-be-the-saudis-king/2015/09/08/06e94328-566c-11e5-8bb1-b488d231bba2_story.html)

<sup>17</sup>Amiran Yatamataan Bnoufouz Kabir Sayouhadidan Moustakbal Al Saoudiya. (2015). *Reuters*.<http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCN0RH2CT20150917?pageNumber=4&virtualBrandChannel=0>