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A Family Affair: The Generational Turnover and the Stability of the Saudi Kingdom

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The lack of transparency regarding succession in Saudi Arabia has fueled speculations about who will succeed 87-year old King Abdullah, currently receiving medical treatment in the United States. The royal house is making extraordinary efforts to project a business-as-usual image, but since June the king has in fact greatly cut down on his schedule, and he has been described by some diplomats as "confused and unfocused."

The succession issue is not risk-free if only because most of King Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud's living children are old and in ill health, while all the other candidates lack experience in running the kingdom. In addition, the process is attended by fierce struggles, occurring generally behind the scenes, making it difficult to predict what the Saudi regime might look like in the coming years.

Before leaving for the US, King Abdullah extended the appointment of some senior officials, including the Saudi ambassador to the United States, and also elevated his son Miteb to the position of Commander of the National Guard (having the status of a government minister) – a significant power base in the kingdom – in an apparent attempt to strengthen his own family's flank on the eve of a possible battle of the succession. In tandem, Crown Prince Sultan, a year younger than the king, returned to the kingdom after a futile battle abroad against cancer in order to formally accept the authority to manage the routine affairs of state, though in practice that power is vested with the third in line to the throne, Abdullah's half-brother and Interior Minister Prince Nayef, who is "only" 77.

Nothing limits the term of Arab rulers other than their own life span. In one of the least stable regions of the globe they are the ones supplying the façade of stability vis-à-vis the West, which has overlooked the moral cost of maintaining contacts with them. However, even this veneer of stability is no longer certain given the advanced age of the rulers in some regimes and the danger that the expected changing of the generational guard will undermine their stability. The largest, richest nation in the Arab world is no different. The Saudi case is unique only in that the holy places of Islam are within its borders, it has the largest reserves of oil in the world, and it is the flag-bearer of the moderate Arab camp.

Alongside terrorism and subversion, the greatest risk to the kingdom actually comes from the prospective succession. Until now, maintaining governmental stability was linked to the Ibn Saud family's retaining control while suppressing other branches among the potential contenders. In addition, until now the succession has gone from brother to brother rather than from father to son; this has ensured the choice of a successor with experience in managing the kingdom but has also created an aging pool of potential heirs. Consequently, it was decided as early as 1992 in the Basic Law of Governance that it was possible to select the successor also from among Ibn Saud's grandsons. Even if the chances of this happening now are slim, in the long term the kingdom cannot evade translating the law into practice.

As part of his desire to limit the power of the Sudairi branch but also in order to ensure a smoother transition of power, King Abdullah established an Allegiance Council in 2006. The group has thirty-five members, including the remaining sons and grandsons of Ibn Saud, and it has the authority to appoint a king under circumstances such as the death of the reigning monarch, the successive deaths of the heir apparent and the king, and if illness or other disability prevents the king from functioning (as in 1995-2005 when Abdullah, then the heir apparent, in practice replaced King Fahd, who was unable to function as the result of a stroke).

For the last 47 years, Crown Prince Sultan has served as the country's Defense Minister and is considered to have close ties to the religious establishment as well as American arms manufacturers, but because of his own ill health his chances of inheriting the throne are slim. His brother Nayef, responsible for internal security, lacks international experience and is considered conservative compared to Abdullah (and negative in his attitude towards Israel); in 2009 he was promoted to become the second Deputy Prime Minister, apparently pointing to preparations for a smooth transition of power. In light of Sultan's ill health, Nayef (who according to some reports is also battling cancer) is now seen as having the best chances of succeeding Abdullah. There is also Prince Salman, the Governor of Riyadh, and Muqran, the Director General of Saudi Intelligence; at 65 he is the youngest living son of Ibn Saud. However, the fact that his mother was not Saudi apparently takes him out of the running. Among Faisal's sons, Saud, who has been Foreign Minister since 1975, is considered relatively young but he suffers from Parkinson's disease; Turki (65) who heads the Strategic Studies Institute and served for 20 years as Director of General of Saudi Intelligence and as Saudi's ambassador to Washington, is likely to be appointed Foreign Minister. Another son, Khalid (70), Governor of Mecca, is sometimes mentioned in the context of the future king because of his good relations with all the branches of the royal family.

The fact that it is theoretically possible to choose the king or heir apparent from among Ibn Saud's grandsons enlarges the pool of potential successors. It has become a custom in the royal household for grandsons to serve as aides to their fathers in the various ministries in order to train them for the future. Nayef's son, Muhammad, a rising star, serving as the de facto Interior Minister and in charge of the war on terrorism, has good

working relations with his counterparts in the West. There is also Khalid, Sultan's firstborn, the de facto Defense Minister who led a not very successful campaign against the Huthi rebels on the border with Yemen. Another son of Sultan, Bandar, served as Saudi ambassador to the United States for 22 years, until his appointment as the head of the Saudi National Security Council. He recently returned to the kingdom quite suddenly after receiving medical treatment abroad. He is seen as a key figure in formulating a pro-Western front as a counterweight to Iran and its satellites; in the past, it was reported that he met with Israeli officials to discuss the issue. It is unclear what post he is likely to fill (perhaps that of an arbitrator or mediator between the princes), but his vast foreign affairs experience and ties to the highest levels of the American administration are an asset to his future career.

It is unclear to what extent – if any – Abdullah's demise might damage the progress (slow in Western terms but speedy by Saudi criteria) towards social and economic reforms, as well as the reconstruction of the kingdom's relations with the United States and the so-far effective handling of terrorism in light of the growth of the threats of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

What of governmental stability? In Saudi Arabia, several thousand princes (of whom about five hundred fill key positions) are to be found in virtually every walk of life – from provincial governors through the bureaucracy to senior army officers – making any attempt to destabilize the nation difficult. Nonetheless, as the number of princes rises it becomes more difficult to maintain unity and loyalty towards the royal household. In addition, the good name of the royal household is a significant component of its strength; the frequent reports on corruption and immoral behavior on the part of certain princes do nothing to add to it.

Saudi Arabia's ability to serve as a counterweight to the rise of Iran, mediator and moderating influence in inter-Arab conflicts, and pillar of strength of American policy in the region is intimately linked to the stability of the House of Ibn Saud and the need to manage the succession smoothly. The fact that both the king and the heir apparent are liable to die in the near future is liable to challenge new institutions that are meant to preserve continuity of governance. If the crown is not passed to the generation of the grandsons, the kingdom's governmental stability will suffer in the long run, if only because the question of succession will again hover over Saudi Arabia.