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## **Saudi Arabia: Aging Monarchy in a Time of Change**

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Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz has died in a Geneva hospital. The death of Nayef, thought to be 79, came as no surprise, for he had been seriously ill for the past several years. Nayef was only named crown prince in October 2011, following the death of Prince Sultan. Now, King Abdullah must nominate a new heir for the second time in 9 months.

With a median age of 25.3, Saudi Arabia's population is younger than the global average. But you would not know that from the Kingdom's leadership. Those at the top of the Saudi royal pyramid are old, and the aging of the leadership could have geopolitical implications. Specifically, the advanced age and failing health of King Abdullah should raise concerns about the future stability of the oil giant in the face of nemesis Iran and the turmoil rocking the Arab world.

The royal family, so it seems, has been preparing for Defense Minister Prince Salman, 77, Nayef's full brother, to take over power in the Kingdom. On November 2011, the former Riyadh regional governor was appointed defense minister, replacing then Crown Prince Sultan, suggesting he is next in line to rule. Salman is the only senior potential heir who is well enough to work. But even Prince Salman's health is far from perfect: he underwent spine surgery in the United States (in 2010), has had at least one stroke, and has an arm that (despite physiotherapy) does not function fully. The official Saudi media have already been preparing the country for Salman's ascent, wanting to show that somebody is in charge. Saudi media have been touting the defense minister as a wise administrator who could act as mediator to settle disputes between family members as well as handle foreign policy.

Nayef had a reputation for being a hard-liner and a conservative. He was believed to be closer than many of his brothers to the powerful Wahhabi religious establishment that gives legitimacy to the royal family, and he at times worked to give a freer hand to the religious police who enforce strict social rules. He was interior minister in charge of internal security forces since 1975, and was known to have a "strong fist" against the kingdom's Shiite minority and for his fierce crackdown against al-Qaeda's following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. He later claimed that Jews were responsible for the attacks.

The lack of transparency regarding succession in Saudi Arabia has fueled speculation about who will succeed the 89-year-old King Abdullah, who has not been working on a daily basis for at least three years and had three back surgeries in 12 months. Abdullah rarely ventures outside his palace, and his brief meetings with visitors are photo opportunities directed at the Saudi state-controlled media. The royal house is making extraordinary efforts to project an image of business as usual.

The succession issue is not risk free, if only because most of King Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud's living sons are old and in ill health, while all other candidates lack experience in

running the Kingdom. In addition, the process is attended by fierce struggles, generally occurring behind the scenes, making it difficult to predict what the Saudi regime might look like in the coming years.

Before the "Arab Spring," nothing would limit the term of Arab rulers other than their own life spans. In one of the least stable regions of the globe, they are the ones still supplying the façade of stability. In the short term, Nayef's death is not expected to trigger any major changes in Saudi oil and foreign policy. However, even this veneer of stability is no longer certain given the advanced ages of the rulers and the danger that the expected changing of the generational guard will undermine stability. The Saudi case is unique only in that the holy places of Islam are within its borders, it is the flag-bearer of the Sunni-Arab camp, and it has the largest reserves of oil in the world.

Until now, maintaining governmental stability was linked to succession going 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 a successor could also be selected from among Ibn Saud's grandsons.

In the long term, the kingdom cannot evade translating the law into practice. But the succession may be no less complicated when the crown moves down a generation to one of Ibn Saud's grandsons. Balancing the interests of the various wings of the family, the children of former kings and of princes will be a delicate task. The more prominent grandsons include Mecca Governor Prince Khaled al-Faisal, a son of the late king Faisal and brother to foreign minister. Others include Eastern Province Governor Prince Mohammed bin Fahd, National Guard chief Prince Miteb bin Abdullah and Deputy Interior Minister Prince Muhammed bin Nayef. 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 U.S.

As part of his desire to limit the power of the Sudairi branch of the family, but also in order to ensure a smoother transition of power by consensus, King Abdullah established an "Allegiance Council" in 2006. The group, numbering thirty-five members, 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 illness or other disability that prevents the king from functioning.

Saudi Arabia's ability to serve as a counterweight to the rise of Iran and as a pillar of strength for American policy in the region is intimately linked to the stability of the House of Saud and the need to manage the succession smoothly. The fact that the king too might die in the near future is liable to challenge new institutions that are meant to preserve continuity of governance. The challenges facing the Kingdom require the transfer of the crown to a third generation prince who will keep the pace and direction of the necessary political and social reforms aimed at reconciling conservative Islamic traditions with the growing needs of a youthful population.