

# Saudi Arabia's game of thrones: Muqrin named deputy crown prince

By Stig Stenslie

## ■ Executive summary

On March 27th 2014 Saudi Arabia's King 'Abd Allah made his half-brother Muqrin deputy crown prince. The appointment ensures regime stability in the short term and postpones the difficult transfer of power to the next generation of princes. Muqrin is the youngest son of the founding king, 'Abd al-'Aziz. His professional credentials are strong; he has a reputation for being open, friendly and honest; and is well liked by the public and the diplomatic community. At the same time the appointment arguably strengthens the candidacy of the king's son, Prince Mitab bin 'Abd Allah, as crown prince and future king. In Riyadh, rumour has it that 'Abd Allah and Muqrin have made a deal: 'Abd Allah will ensure that Muqrin becomes king, while Muqrin will make Mitab crown prince. The recent appointment of Mitab as deputy crown prince indicates that such an understanding in fact exists. The biggest losers in this game of thrones are the Sudayris, and Muqrin's appointment casts doubt over the political and financial prospects of this branch of the royal family. The biggest loser is Prince Ahmad, youngest of the surviving Sudayri brothers. But Muqrin's appointment also weakens Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, who is widely believed to be Mitab's strongest competitor among the younger princes.

## Introduction

On March 27th 2014 Saudi Arabia's King 'Abd Allah made his half-brother Muqrin deputy crown prince in a royal decree. The appointment ensures regime stability in the short term and postpones the difficult power transfer to the next generation of princes. At the same time it arguably strengthens the candidacy of the king's son, Prince Mitab bin 'Abd Allah, as future crown prince and king of Saudi Arabia. The biggest losers in this game of thrones are the Sudayris, and Muqrin's appointment casts doubt over the political and financial prospects of this branch of the royal family. The biggest loser in this regard is Prince Ahmad, youngest of the surviving Sudayri brothers. But Muqrin's appointment also weakens Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, who is widely believed to be Mitab's strongest competitor among the younger princes.

## The appointment

Prince Muqrin bin 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Sa'ud is granted allegiance as crown prince should the position as of the crown prince become vacant, and is granted allegiance

as king of the state should the positions as king and crown prince be vacant at the same time.

Thus read the statement from the royal court carried by the state news agency, the Saudi Press Agency. It further specified that this order "shall not be amended or replaced by any means or by whomsoever".

In the days that followed ceremonies were held throughout the country in which princes, tribal chiefs, prominent ministers, government officials and ordinary citizens swore allegiance (*bay'a*) to Muqrin. Muqrin himself held a reception in Riyadh, while regional governors received allegiances on his behalf.

Although this is the first time a deputy crown prince has been designated, it is not a radical break with established practice: besides appointing the heirs apparent, Saudi kings have appointed "second deputy prime ministers" since 1967, a post that has been bestowed on the third prince in the line of succession. In February 2013 King 'Abd

Allah named Muqrin as second deputy prime minister, the fifth royal to hold this position.

Ahead of Muqrin's appointment King 'Abd Allah consulted the Allegiance Council, which he established in 2006. This is in contrast to what he did after the previous two crown princes – Sultan and Nayif – died, when the council was simply informed of the king's decision to appoint their replacements. The reason why the council was consulted this time is likely that the choice of Muqrin was more controversial, because it also points to the transfer of power to the next generation of princes. The members of the council were individually consulted in order to establish consensus around Muqrin, and according to the statement from the royal court more than three-quarters of council members – or around eight senior princes – “were in favor of the measure”. Nevertheless, this shows that the whole family does not support Muqrin's promotion. It was not made public who had voted for and against the appointment.

Moreover, the appointment is not unique in light of the actions of the other monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. In 2003 something similar was done in Abu Dhabi, when Shaykh Zayid made his son, Muhammad bin Zayid, deputy crown prince. This appointment helped to secure a smooth power transition, although the succession line in Abu Dhabi was clearer than it currently is in Saudi Arabia.

### The generational shift delayed

The appointment ensures regime stability in the short term and postpones the difficult transfer of power to the next generation of princes.

There has been considerable uncertainty around royal succession in Saudi Arabia, and many fear there will be a power vacuum when the reigning king dies. King 'Abd Allah has ruled the kingdom for almost 20 years (as de facto ruler since 1995 and king from 2005), but he turns 90 this year and his health is weakening. He has had several spinal operations, gets tired easily, and has to be given oxygen to breathe. Despite this, he has an iron will and there are no indications that he plans to abdicate. Crown Prince Salman is 77 years and is also in poor health, and it is said that he is suffering from Alzheimer's.

Muqrin – aged 69 – is somewhat younger than the other few surviving “second-generation princes” – the sons of the founding king, 'Abd al-'Aziz – and is apparently in relatively good health. His professional credentials are strong: he was trained as an F-15 pilot, and served as provincial governor in Hail (1980-99) and Medina (1999-2005), as head of the General Intelligence Directorate from 2005 to 2012, and as advisor and special envoy to King 'Abd Allah after that. He has a reputation of being open, friendly and honest, and is well liked by the public and the diplomatic community. Muqrin is known for his passion for classical Arabic poetry and astronomy, and interest in agriculture. Nonetheless, his appointment challenges the established understanding of how princes can qualify to be

king. Many observers believed that Muqrin's maternal ancestry would disqualify him, as he is among the founding king's sons without Saudi tribal lineage. His mother was known as “Baraka the Yemeni” and it is not clear whether 'Abd al-'Aziz was married to her or whether she was a slave girl or concubine.

If Salman becomes king – which is in no way guaranteed, because a team of doctors appointed by the Allegiance Commission might well declare him to be medically incompetent – he can in theory exercise his prerogative as king and undo the royal decree. However, such a move is not very likely because there is no precedent for royal decrees being undone.

Muqrin will thus most likely become king, either when 'Abd Allah dies or after a short period of rule by Salman. This means that the generational shift in the royal family will be delayed, which might be positive in terms of regime stability. Such a shift will test the unity among the royals and, hence, the royal family's grip on power. Currently there seem to be deep divisions over the prime contenders, who are widely believed to be the king's son Mitab and Muhammad bin Nayif.

### A master plan to positioning Muqrin?

Muqrin's appointment arguably strengthens the candidacy of the king's son, Prince Mitab bin 'Abd Allah – aged 62 – as future crown prince and king. There is much evidence that the king would like to see his son rise to the top; the king installed Mitab as minister of the Saudi Arabian National Guard in May 2013, which is a solid springboard for a future king.

In Riyadh rumour has it that 'Abd Allah and Muqrin have made a deal: 'Abd Allah will ensure that Muqrin becomes king, while Muqrin will make Mitab crown prince. The recent appointment of Mitab as deputy crown prince indicates that such an understanding in fact exists. For King 'Abd Allah it would be a huge advantage that Muqrin appoints Mitab as crown prince, because it is taboo for a Saudi king to personally appoint his son as successor. Moreover, Muqrin has no full brothers or sons with realistic political ambitions – his two sons only have business interests, so he himself is thus perfect for promoting King 'Abd Allah's succession agenda.

This also follows a pattern in which the king has gradually strengthened his own branch of the family, the Al 'Abd Allah. King 'Abd Allah has in recent years placed his sons in key positions, having installed Prince Turki as governor of Riyadh in May 2014, Prince Mishaal as governor of Mecca in December 2013, Prince Abd al-'Aziz as deputy foreign minister in July 2011 and Prince Khalid as member of the Allegiance Council.

The biggest losers in this game of thrones are the Sudayris, and Muqrin's appointment casts doubt over the political and financial prospects of this branch of the royal family.

There are good reasons to believe that representatives of the Sudayri branch voted against Muqrin in the Allegiance Council. The biggest loser in this regard is Prince Ahmad, youngest of the surviving Sudayri brothers, who is both older than Muqrin – 74 – and has a mother of Saudi aristocratic tribal background. In the family, however, he is a polarising figure known for his religious conservatism. As compensation, it is not unlikely that in the future Ahmad will be appointed defence minister, a post he is known to want.

Muqrin’s appointment also weakens Prince Muhammad bin Nayif – aged 55 – who is widely seen to be Mitab’s strongest

competitor among the younger princes. Muhammad bin Nayif is interior minister and son of the late Crown Prince Nayif of the Sudayri branch, and is known as a dynamic and accomplished leader. He has especially made his mark in the fight against militant Islamists in the Kingdom. Many observers claim that he is the U.S.’s preferred candidate, and it has been hinted that the public announcement of Muqrin’s appointment on the day before President Barack Obama’s visit to Riyadh was deliberately chosen to underline that the royal family does not take guidance from Washington in such matters. Nevertheless, one should not read too much into this convergence. U.S. interests have never influenced the choice of the heir to the Saudi throne. ■

## ■ THE AUTHOR

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