

The Saudi succession and challenges facing Saudi Arabia

By Michael Herb

■ Executive summary

The senior leadership of Saudi Arabia has seen more upheaval in the past several years than in any period since the early 1960s. This has been accompanied by some perplexing policy decisions – such as the refusal of a United Nations Security Council seat – and a domestic crackdown on dissent. Putting all of this together, some observers have expressed disquiet about the current course of the Kingdom. Yet, at least in the realm of succession politics, there is little to suggest that there is much going on beyond a quickening of the pace of personnel changes related largely to the ageing of the political elite. Saudi Arabia's more serious challenges lie outside the royal family in the need to find employment for its citizens, expand political participation and deal with a deteriorating regional security situation.

Despite some observers' disquiet about the current course of the Kingdom (Lippman, 2014; Sager, 2012), until recently Saudi Arabia has had a very stable succession mechanism, even by the standards of Gulf monarchies. Each king has had not only a crown prince, but also a second in line. On the death of the king, the second in line was invariably made crown prince, and the new king selected a new second in line, although not always immediately. (The specific post used to designate the second in line has varied over the years.) The choice of second in line followed a straightforward principle: he was the next-oldest son of the Kingdom's founder, 'Abd al-'Aziz bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Saud. A few sons were skipped, but only as a result of their own lack of interest or a wide family consensus that they were not qualified.

This system cannot, of course, survive the ageing of the sons of 'Abd al-'Aziz. In 2011 Crown Prince Sultan died: this was the first time in the modern history of Saudi Arabia that a prince had died while in the line of succession. Sultan had first been appointed to the line of succession in 1982. On Sultan's death, Nayif (appointed by King 'Abd Allah as second in line in 2009) became crown prince. Then, within a year, Nayif himself died. 'Abd Allah appointed

Salman as crown prince and (in 2013) Muqrin as second in line. In short, 'Abd Allah thus far has placed three of his brothers in the line of succession. His predecessors, back to King Saud, placed only one prince each in the line of succession.

In itself, this rapid series of appointments would ensure more dissent over the succession than usual. But King 'Abd Allah's appointments have skipped more brothers than all previous appointments combined: his three appointments have left ten princes out in the cold (not counting one on his deathbed); in all of their succession decisions his predecessors skipped over only seven princes.¹ 'Abd Allah skipped six with his 2009 appointment of Nayif as second in line and another four with his appointment of Muqrin as second in line.

Some of those passed over – notably 'Abd al-Rahman and Ahmad – were strong candidates by the standards of previous appointments. Shortly after Nayif was confirmed as crown prince, his older brother 'Abd al-Rahman was removed as deputy minister of defence without the usual stipulation that it was at his request. A few days later Talal (who was a "Free Prince" in the 1960s) resigned from the

¹ There is disagreement over the exact birth order of some of the brothers, including 'Abd Allah himself. The Saudi press occasionally gives a birth order for living (and recently deceased) princes, and order of precedence (and thus seniority) is apparent in published lists of princes who have received appointments or appeared at an event. The source that most accurately follows these fragmentary references appears to be the one on Arabic Wikipedia. In any case, whatever list is used, 'Abd Allah has skipped more brothers than his predecessors combined.

Allegiance Council; he had earlier (in 2009) sent a fax to Reuters demanding clarification from the royal court when Nayif was appointed second in line. Ahmad, senior to Muqrin, was removed as minister of the interior in the period between Nayif's death and Muqrin's appointment as second in line.²

Despite the grumbling of older brothers, Muqrin's appointment makes sense. Following the system of seniority would ensure that the entire line of succession consisted of very old men. Muqrin is the youngest of the living brothers, and the next vacancy will be filled by a grandson. In terms of the traditions of Arabian monarchy, the fact that Muqrin's mother was of Yemeni descent is not an insuperable obstacle to his kingship, nor is his lack of full brothers (which he shares with the current king).

What, then, of the role of the Allegiance Council? 'Abd Allah formed it in 2006 as a body that would determine the line of succession: it is composed of princes from the family of each son of 'Abd al-'Aziz, of whom there were 36, although a few have died without sons. Under 'Abd Allah, however, it has had a peripheral role. The decree that set it up made no mention of the second in line, even though the appointment of the second in line has without exception determined the line of succession in modern Saudi Arabia. Moreover, 'Abd Allah decreed that the law would apply only to his successors, not himself, and he has mostly ignored the Allegiance Council in his appointments. It had no apparent role in naming Nayif or Muqrin as second deputy prime minister in 2009 and 2013, respectively. The council met to confirm the elevation of Nayif as crown prince in 2011, but was not mentioned in the decree naming Salman as crown prince in 2012. 'Abd Allah, however, apparently wanted to more firmly establish Muqrin as second in line. In 2014 he polled the members of the Allegiance Council, securing the agreement of "more than three quarters" of its members for the appointment of Muqrin as deputy crown prince, a position that had not been occupied for decades. While the explicit acknowledgement of dissent in the family was unusual, "more than three quarters" indicates a solid family consensus supporting Muqrin.

Future kings will likely use the Allegiance Council in the same spirit as 'Abd Allah: to ratify their choices and signal the formation of a consensus. Where the Allegiance Council might have a more decisive role is in the case of the incapacity of the king and crown prince. (It was created shortly after a period in which the Kuwaiti amir and crown prince were both unable to govern, producing a difficult succession.) 'Abd Allah is both old and not healthy (he is around 90), and Salman, his crown prince, is said to suffer from dementia. The Allegiance Council provides an institu-

tional backstop in the event of the incapacity of the king and crown prince.

Outside the line of succession there have been recent changes in most other major ministries, although only the Ministry of Defence is really unsettled. Until recently the more important ministries were fiefdoms held in one branch of the family, with very long tenures (perhaps too long) in the top posts (Sultan at the Ministry of Defence; 'Abd Allah – and now his son – at the National Guard; Nayif at the Ministry of the Interior, with his son now in charge; Faysal's branch at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Since the dismissal of 'Abd al-Rahman bin 'Abd al-'Aziz in 2011, however, two of Sultan's sons, one of Bandar son's and one other prince have held the post of deputy minister of defence (a particularly important post, given that Salman is both crown prince and minister of defence). The changes may be a result of efforts to appoint the right man to the right job in a very difficult regional context, or intense dynastic manoeuvring, or the fickleness of an ageing king – or all three.

What does all of this say about Saudi Arabia's stability? In the larger context of Gulf dynastic monarchies the current succession issues are not unusual. Despite grumbings about Khalid al-Tuwaijri, the king's (non-royal) consigliere, there is no indication that the king is actually trying to shift the locus of power away from the royal family: he has dismissed prominent princes, but replaced them with other prominent princes. Tweets from disaffected princes are a modern (and more public) form of the unhappiness that always accompanies succession issues in Gulf dynasties. Succession problems will neither bring down the regime nor destabilise it to the point that it becomes fragile. The dynastic monarchies of the Gulf are more robust than that.

The more serious challenges to Saudi Arabia – and the Al Saud – lie elsewhere. The recent crackdown on internal dissent (while perhaps in the short-term interests of the Al Saud) threatens the long-term political prospects of the Kingdom, which eventually will need to find a way to allow greater political participation. The regional security environment is challenging and Saudi Arabia is not the only country facing few really good foreign policy choices. The economy must be diversified and jobs must be found for young Saudis. The king's ageing can perhaps be blamed for some odd policy decisions (most prominently the renunciation of a UN Security Council seat), but the Kingdom's overall policy direction reflects the difficulties of the external (and domestic) environment. The Al Saud will resolve their succession disputes; these other challenges will be more difficult.

² That said, his replacement, the son of former crown prince Nayif, is said to be "able" and "hard-working", and is certainly younger, so the move had a logic to it apart from mere palace manoeuvring (Henderson, 2013).

Table 1: The Al Saud line of succession

Prince and birth order	Became king	Named crown prince	Named second in line ³	Princes who were skipped when a younger brother was named second in line	Birth order
Saud	2	1953	1933	–	
Faisal	3	1964	1953	Understood to be second in line before 1953	
Khalid	5	1975	1965	1962	Muhammad
Fahd	9	1982	1975	1967	Nasir Sa'd
'Abd Allah	12	2005	1982	1975	Bandar Musaid
Sultan	15		2005 (died 2011)	1982	'Abdal-Muhsin Mishaal
Nayif	23		2011 (died 2012)	2009	'Abd al-Rahman Mitab Talal Badr Turki II Nawwaf
Salman	25		2012	–	
Muqrin	35			2013 2014 (deputy crown prince)	Mamduh 'Abd al-Allah Sattam Ahmad Mashur

Notes: Turki, the eldest son, died in 1918. Eight died while an older brother was second in line: Mansur (8th in birth order), Mishari (19th), Fawwaz (24th), Majid (26th), Thamiir (27th), Hithlul (32nd), 'Abd al-Majid (33rd) and Humud (36th).

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³ The post of second deputy prime minister has conventionally designated the second in line since Fahd's appointment to the post. Khalid was appointed deputy prime minister in 1962.

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