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Saudi Arabia after Abdullah

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Both inside and outside of Saudi Arabia, the common assessment is that political stability in the kingdom is connected to the health and longevity of the absolutist monarch who rules the country. Therefore, the prolonged hospitalization of the current king, Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, “custodian” of oil and Islamic holy sites, has led to concerns about the continued stability and future policy of this key country at a time when it faces serious challenges both at home and abroad.

The royal house is attempting to convey a message of business as usual, but there is a certain lack of clarity regarding the state of Abdullah’s health and his ability to fulfill his duties. The 91-year-old king entered the hospital on December 31, 2014 for “medical tests.” The official Saudi press agency (SPA) subsequently reported that he suffers from pneumonia and requires temporary “artificial respiration.” His family, which is synonymous with the country’s leadership, is constantly at his bedside in the hospital in Riyadh, as are delegations from neighboring countries concerned about his health. The uncertainty about the king’s situation aggravates the confusion in Saudi Arabia, and it is the background to conflicting reports on the matter on social networks.

The Saudi royal family’s supreme interest is to retain the power in its own hands, and therefore its ability to transfer power in the kingdom as smoothly as possible is of major importance. However, within a short time three heirs to the throne were appointed, which underscores that as long as the current leadership does not appoint a successor to the throne from among Ibn Saud’s grandsons, the issue of succession – that is, the ability to allow the new generation of leaders to handle the kingdom’s critical affairs – will threaten the stability of the kingdom.

The custom since the days of Ibn Saud, Abdullah’s father and the founder of the modern Saudi kingdom, is that the crown passes among his sons, in this case, to Abdullah’s half brother, Crown Prince and Defense Minister Salman. The process of succession has thus far been smooth. Indeed, the fact that Abdullah has an experienced heir in the form of Salman should lessen concerns about a succession struggle, which would lead to a power

vacuum. However, the 80-year-old Salman is functioning only partially, since he has suffered a stroke and apparently suffers from dementia. If and when he is appointed king, he will probably rule for a shorter time than any Saudi king until now.

In order to ensure governmental stability, in March 2014 Abdullah appointed Prince Muqrin, his 70-year-old right hand man and the youngest surviving son of Ibn Saud, as crown prince in waiting. This appointment, which symbolized the desire for continuity over the choice of progress and change, further postponed the transfer of leadership in the kingdom to the generation of Ibn Saud's grandsons. And while Muqrin, a fighter pilot by training, was the governor of a Medina and the head of intelligence, his path to the crown is strewn with obstacles: he is opposed by many of his half brothers, primarily because he is the son of a maidservant of Yemeni origin. Because of Salman's health, it is likely that Muqrin will de facto fill the role of king. If he succeeds in overcoming opposition at home, thanks to his relative youth and good health, Muqrin can also rule for many years. However, it is not inconceivable that as king, Salman will seek to appoint another successor, from his branch of the family, to replace Muqrin – a move that could set off a succession battle within the House of Saud.

The royal family is seeking to avert the succession struggle's negative impact on the kingdom's stability. The Saudi Basic Law of Governance of 1992 states that the crown can also pass to the generation of Ibn Saud's grandsons. In 2006, a Council of Allegiance was established whose role is to aid the next king in choosing the heir to the throne and in regulating processes for the transfer of power. The 1992 law and the establishment of the Council of Allegiance laid the groundwork for transferring government succession to the next generation of princes, but only in principle. In practice, the process could be complex and involve renewed power struggles within the family.

While the issue of royal succession in Saudi Arabia seems to unfold like a soap opera, this absolutist kingdom, which possesses the largest oil reserves in the world and is the home of Muslim holy sites, is run according to these anachronistic codes. The arrangements for succession in Saudi Arabia were designed in accordance with the principles bequeathed by Ibn Saud, the unique needs of the kingdom, and the circumstances and political structure that have developed. Over the years, the transfer of power among members of one generation has contributed to some extent to regime stability, but it has created a problem resulting from the aging pool of potential heirs. The struggle for power, underway behind the scenes, has thus become one involving many princes.

How important is the identity of the next king? Traditionally Saudi policy has been closely associated with the personality and opinions of the king. Although decisions are generally made through consultation and a desire for agreement among senior officials of the Saud family, the king is the final arbiter. Abdullah's passing will end a key chapter in

the history of Saudi Arabia. He has been king since 2005 but has been the de facto ruler for the past twenty years since his brother Fahd had a stroke and was unable to function fully. Abdullah promoted quite a few reforms (in Saudi terms), especially in the realm of the status of women. The Arab Peace Initiative, which offers Israel “normal relations” with the Arab Muslim world (in exchange for concessions) – whether the initiative is a diktat to Israel or a basis for negotiations, and however unclear it is whether the Arab world in its current state can stand behind it – is also named after King Abdullah. And more than his predecessors, Abdullah has even permitted certain relations with Israel, as long as they are kept secret.

Furthermore, Abdullah succeeded in guiding the kingdom through the turmoil in the Arab world in recent years. In the early stages of the regional uprisings, he made a series of appointments, apparently with the goal of preserving continuity and stability. He promoted his son Mutab, who is in charge of the National Guard, to a ministerial position in the cabinet. (In this context, Abdullah apparently asked Muqrin, in exchange for his appointment, to appoint Mutab in the future as crown prince.) Abdullah also appointed his third son, Abdul Aziz, as deputy to Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal. Al-Faisal, who has served in this position since 1975, is in poor health, and it is believed that when he dies, Abdul Aziz will take his place. Abdullah appointed his son Mishaal governor of the province of Mecca, the province most important to Islam and the second most important province in the kingdom, and his seventh son, Turki, as governor of Riyadh Province.

These appointments have placed at the royal family’s disposal experienced and worthy candidates from the generation of ibn Saud’s grandsons who could take on key roles in the future. However, this is mainly an attempt on Abdullah’s part to give his sons an advantage in the future struggle over succession. Another candidate who is often mentioned as having a good chance of winning the crown is Muhammad bin Nayef, the Saudi minister of the interior. Although his achievements in the war on terror are questionable, he is well connected and highly regarded by his counterparts in the West.

Saudi Arabia will likely have a new king in 2015, and no matter who he is, he will face several significant challenges. The Arab world is confronting one of its most difficult hours, and political stability in Saudi Arabia has implications for all Arab states. Until now, oil and gas revenues have been a tool used by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to shape the landscape of the Middle East. With the help of these revenues, the royal houses support one regime and undermine another, in accordance with their geostrategic (and sometimes sectarian) interest. If oil prices remain at their current level for a long time, Saudi Arabia’s reserves (some \$750 billion) will gradually be eroded, and with them, the ability to provide economic support not only to different actors, such as Egypt and Jordan, but also to Saudi citizens themselves.