



A NEW KING FOR SAUDI ARABIA

By Rachel Bronson



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Saudi Arabia's smooth leadership succession is exceptional in today's violent and bloody Middle East. In neighboring Yemen, a coup upended local politics and is threatening to turn very ugly very quickly. In Iraq, Washington, Riyadh and Tehran forced a power transition when the Maliki regime failed to contain and defeat the Islamic State. Even Egypt has careened from Hosni Mubarak to Mohammed Morsi to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, three presidents in 4 years.

And yet Saudi Arabia, the country that produces endless discussion about leadership succession will, for the 6th time in its history, experience a peaceful transition to the Kingdom's seventh king. The only real tussle for power in the Kingdom's modern history occurred a half century ago when King Faisal wrested control from his brother then King Saud. Even that transition didn't result in anything near the level of violence and chaos exhibited today.

Saudi Arabia's new king, Salman bin Abdel Aziz al-Saud, the son of the King's founder Abdel Aziz al Saud, is expected to assume his new title without controversy. What's more, his successor is also in place. Prince, Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, the new Crown Prince will follow Salman. Who comes after Muqrin is rife with speculation but that transition is probably more than a decade away – an eternity given what's going on in the region today.

The Legacy of King Abdullah

King Abdullah served as Saudi Arabia's first post-Cold War King. His predecessor King Fahd, like his brothers before him, had involved the Kingdom in one way or another in global pursuits to roll back communism. Whether it was King Khaled's stepped up activities in Africa in the 1970s or Fahd's support of the Contras in Central America in the 1980s, the Saudi leadership like many others was deeply engaged in the global struggle between the two super powers. Along with the increases in oil prices after the 1970s the massive defense deals and offers of foreign aid allowed for a level of corruption that reached grave heights under King Fahd.

Although Abdullah took power in 2005 after the death of King Fahd, he had been slowly amassing power since King Fahd's debilitating stroke in 1995. Perhaps because he served so long as the head of the National Guard, King Abdullah gave greater focus to solidifying power at home, and raising Saudi Arabia's profile in the region, rather than across the entire globe.

Abdullah will be remembered for identifying poverty inside the kingdom as a national priority, reaching out to women and the Shi'a minority through a series of National Dialogues early in his tenure and trying to nudge a stubbornly conservative

population toward increased engagement if not tolerance. He brought Saudi Arabia into the WTO to help stamp out endemic local corruption and created a co-ed university in his name to ensure it was protected. Although he never moved as fast as many inside and outside the Kingdom would have preferred, he seemed intent to move in a more inclusive direction. This helped Saudi Arabia weather the dangerous homegrown terrorist attacks that targeted the regime in and after 2003. By focusing on domestic reform, he hoped to create a less toxic local environment that, until then, was producing idle disillusioned recruits to terror.

Two sets of events eventually stymied Abdullah's reform: Iran's increasing advances throughout the region in places such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen; and the Arab spring that began in 2011. Both posed significant threats to Riyadh and eventually overshadowed domestic reform.

Washington seemed unable or unwilling to help the King address either of these two realities. The US-Iran nuclear negotiations unnerved the Kingdom, whose leaders did not believe that the US fully shared their concern with Iran's growing regional role. Because he no longer believed he could count on US support to help shape the region to Saudi's liking, King Abdullah attempted (with not much success) to raise Saudi Arabia's profile and forge a more independent foreign policy. This focus on foreign policy drew significant attention away from the promising domestic agenda that defined his earliest years as King.

Abdullah's legacy is therefore one of considerable promise in the beginning followed by slowed if not-stalled domestic efforts. The newly assertive Saudi foreign policy developed at the back half of his rule did not yield many successes. Abdullah will be credited for maintaining stability in the Kingdom during very unstable times. Unfortunately, he never achieved many of the larger signature reforms for which many advocates inside the Kingdom and out had hoped.

He has, however, helped the Kingdom transition from the sons of the founder to the grandsons in a stunning appointment made upon the announcement of his death. Mohammed bin Nayef -- a grandson of the Kingdom's founder -- has been named deputy Crown Prince. A close ally of King Abdullah and the United States, Prince Mohammed's appointment may be Abdullah's most long-lasting contribution to his country.

What We Know about the Next King, King Salman

Not only is the Saudi leadership transition likely to be smooth, but King Salman is a well-known figure in Saudi politics. Salman has played important roles in Saudi leadership including serving as the Governor of Riyadh, an important position given that most of the Saudi leadership resides there. He oversaw the transition of a city that grew from less than 200,000 in 1963 to 7 million today. By most accounts he did so with considerable skill.

In foreign policy, Prince Salman has been an active and visible player for a long time. In one of his more high profile roles he played a key part in funneling significant amounts of cash to Pakistan and Afghanistan during the Afghan war, which aligned with US policy and defined interests.

In terms of energy policy, Salman has publically declared his support for oil minister Ali al-Naimi's decision to allow oil prices to drop without decreasing Saudi production to urge prices up. It would be surprising if Salman made any sudden changes regarding this controversial pricing policy.

On the economic and foreign policy front, King Salman is therefore likely to pursue policies similar to his half-brother King Abdullah. He is old (around 79) and in ill health, but he is well known to the US and others and will likely continue to plod along on the course set by his predecessor.

It was unlikely a coincidence that Prince Muqrin was appointed deputy crown prince only a day before President Obama touched down in Riyadh this past March. The King seemed to be getting his house in order, ensuring that the US understood its successions plan, and that key US practitioners had the opportunity to meet their soon-to-be counterparts.

The appointment of the new deputy Crown Prince is also quite important. Prince Mohammed bin Nayef the current Interior Minister is another important outcome. The US has established deep ties with Prince Mohammed and has worked with him extensively in counter terrorism operations. His professional career has been devoted to domestic security, meaning he will bring a security lens to his rule. But the royal family is leaving nothing to chance and has quietly if suddenly ended the decades-long speculation about whether they will ever be able to peacefully transition from the sons of the founder to the

grandsons.

The Challenges Facing King Salman

The challenges facing Saudi Arabia are profound ranging from ISIS to Syria to an expanding Iran but three issues stick out as requiring immediate attention: the coup in Yemen, contentious oil policy, and the need to rethink domestic reforms.

Saudi Arabia has historically viewed Yemen with enormous concern. Yemen's population of 27 million rivals if not surpasses Saudi Arabia's. The border between the two countries has been traditionally porous, and Saudi has fought wars and skirmishes there throughout its history. Saudi Arabia interprets events in Yemen through a sectarian lens. Yesterday's Houthi coup in Yemen is viewed by Riyadh as a direct gain for Tehran. Yemen will be Salman's first international crisis and happily for him the US is similarly worried. A mutual concern about events in Yemen will provide US and Saudi leaders the opportunity to engage each other directly and immediately.

King Salman will also have to consider how long oil prices should remain low before the Kingdom considers reducing its own supply. Many in the kingdom, including Prince al-Waleed bin Talal think the Kingdom should be doing more to raise prices. Saudi Arabia is expecting to run a fiscal deficit for the first time since 2011, and although spending will continue, investments will decrease. The new king is on record backing al-Naimi's position on low prices which aligned with King Abdullah's views. Still, there is only so long that King Salman will be able to raid the Kingdom's international investments to pay for domestic programs.

Finally, there is the issue of reform. King Abdullah had made domestic reform a priority early in his tenure but backed off toward the end of this life. How will a King Salman respond? He has given little reason to believe he will pursue policies much different than his half-brother toward the end of his life. But one has to wonder whether the Kingdom's leadership can survive the visible torturing of prisoners in public, for example the public flogging of a blogger alongside the continued gruesome violence of the Islamic State and its affiliates. The coincidence of the flogging and the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hedbo's offices in France was an uncomfortable one for the Kingdom. Can King Salman continue to marginalize free speech and local activism and keep a lid on the domestic tensions that exist in the Kingdom?

The Road Ahead

King Salman faces a tough road ahead. Given the orderly transition, the Kingdom appears well positioned to muddle through. But can it do more than that? What the region and the Kingdom need are new leaders who can take brave new actions and act decisively and quickly. Given the age and failing health of King Salman, this kind of vibrant leadership is unlikely. The Kingdom may be in store for a period of sclerotic stability rather than the chaos and uncertainty that many forecasted just a few days ago. Still, inertia brings its own problems. Brave and bold leadership may be in short supply at a time when the Kingdom most needs it.