

From 'Abd Allah to Salman: royal succession in Saudi Arabia

By Stig Stenslie

■ Executive summary

On January 23rd 2015 Salman succeeded 'Abd Allah as king of Saudi Arabia. On the same day the new king named his half-brother, Muqrin, crown prince and his nephew, Muhammad bin Nayif, deputy crown prince, making him second in line of succession. The king also named his son, Muhammad bin Salman, defence minister and head of the royal court. Through these appointments Salman initiated the much-debated generational change in the royal family, transferring power from the sons to the grandsons of Ibn Sa'ud. King Salman has publicly pledged to stay on the path as his predecessors, and there are reasons to expect continuity rather than change in Saudi Arabia's foreign, energy, and domestic policies.

Introduction

Saudi Arabia's King 'Abd Allah died on the night of Friday January 23rd 2015. The king, who was around 90 years old, had ruled the kingdom for two decades. He became the country's de facto ruler after then-king Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995, and was formally appointed king when his predecessor died in 2005. On the same day that he died King 'Abd Allah was buried in an unmarked grave, his body shrouded in a simple beige cloth without a coffin – in line with Wahhabi-Islamic teachings. On the same day Salman became king and named Muqrin crown prince and Muhammad bin Nayif deputy crown prince.

Al Sudayri power grab

Salman could in theory have been disqualified if the Allegiance Council – a family body that has the last word in matters relating to the succession – had found him unfit to rule. It has long been said that the 82-year-old heir suffers from dementia or Alzheimer's. The new king is oldest surviving son of modern Saudi Arabia's founder, King 'Abd al-'Aziz (Ibn Sa'ud), and is highly politically experienced and respected within the royal family. In nearly 50 years Salman was governor of Riyadh Province and was known as the one who kept order within the royal house. He was appointed defence minister in 2011 and the crown prince in 2012.

Muqrin, who is 69 years, is Salman's half-brother and is also politically experienced. He was trained as an F-15 pilot

in the U.S. and served as provincial governor in Hail (1980-99) and Medina (1999-2005), as intelligence chief from 2005 to 2012, and then as an adviser and special envoy to late king 'Abd Allah. Although many observers believed that Muqrin's maternal background would disqualify him from the line of succession, he was appointed second in line to the throne in 2013 and now crown prince. However, he has a weak personal power base and it is not a given that he will one day become king.

More surprising was the appointment of Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayif – who is 55 years old – as deputy crown prince and second deputy prime minister. The appointment came quickly and was likely controversial among the royal family because it set a direction for the generational shift within the family, i.e. which one of Ibn Sa'ud's numerous grandsons will first take power. The royal decree announcing the appointment stated that the appointment was supported "by a majority" in the Allegiance Council, indicating that the decision met resistance.

Muhammad bin Nayif's appointment appears to be a "palace coup" organised by Salman and the Sudayri clan, a powerful alliance within the royal family of seven full brothers, whose mother was Hassa bint Ahmad al-Sudayri. Today, King Salman is the most powerful among the remaining brothers and Muhammad bin Nayif is the son of another Sudayri brother. Through this appointment,

Salman passed over Mitab bin 'Abd Allah, the 62-year-old son of the late king, whom King 'Abd Allah probably wanted to become the future ruler of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Salman appointed his own son, 34-year-old Muhammad bin Salman, defence minister and head of the royal court. Through a royal decree issued on January 30th 2015 Salman ordered a sweeping government reshuffle. Two of 'Abd Allah's sons were deposed as governors: Mish'al bin 'Abd Allah was replaced by Khalid al-Faysal in Mecca and Turki bin 'Abd Allah was replaced by Faysal bin Bandar in Riyadh. Through these appointments the new king brought the Al Sudayri back as the dominant royal family faction, while demoting the 'Abd Allah faction.

Given the king's age and health, and the crown prince's weak power base, the stage is set for Muhammad bin Nayif. He has a strong power base in the Interior Ministry and has earned a reputation as an effective leader by driving al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula out of Saudi Arabia. He has a good standing in Washington, DC. Muhammad bin Salman is another important player as the world's youngest defence minister and as an adviser to his father. Ten days into his reign King Salman disbanded 14 royal councils that bore responsibility for different aspects of Saudi governance, replacing this complicated structure with just two bodies: the Council of Political and Security Affairs, headed by Muhammad bin Nayif, and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, headed by Muhammad bin Salman.

'Abd Allah's legacy

King 'Abd Allah left a mixed legacy. During his two decades in power Saudi Arabia experienced strong economic growth, particularly during the period 2005-14. During these years the country's gross domestic product (GDP) grew by as much as 140% and per capita GDP doubled. Since 2003 the kingdom has acquired an aggregate surplus of \$1 trillion. The country's capacity to produce oil also increased significantly to 12 million barrels per day. Besides, 'Abd Allah took important steps to diversify the Saudi economy in order to make it less oil dependent.

'Abd Allah's Saudi Arabia led an active regional diplomacy. In the wake of the "Arab Spring", many perceived the kingdom as a counterrevolutionary force in the Middle East and 'Abd Allah as a "modern prince Metternich". This is a partial truth: in the case of Egypt, 'Abd Allah undermined the government of Muhammad Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), and helped to bring the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces under General 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi back into power. Likewise, the king helped to crush the popular uprising in Bahrain through the military occupation of the small neighbouring country. In contrast, 'Abd Allah supported revolutionary forces in Libya and Syria, and played a role in the negotiations that led to President Salih giving up power in Yemen. 'Abd Allah's main foreign policy goals were to contain Riyadh's archenemy, i.e. Shia Iran, and to

undermine the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and democracy movements across the Middle East.

Meanwhile Saudi-U.S. relations cooled under 'Abd Allah. The king was furious over the Obama administration's unwillingness to support Mubarak in Egypt, overture's to Iran and nuclear talks with that country, unsuccessful attempts to create peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and unwillingness to act militarily against the Assad regime in Syria (which 'Abd Allah perceived as an Iranian client). To underline his dissatisfaction with the U.S./ international community over these issues, 'Abd Allah surprisingly declined the offer of a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in October 2013.

'Abd Allah succeeded in preserving stability in the kingdom, a challenge in light of the regional turbulence that followed in the wake of the "Arab Spring" in 2011. Saudi Arabia was not immune to the turmoil, but the king undermined a major domestic mobilisation through the use of both carrot and stick. 'Abd Allah invested tens of billions of dollars in various welfare measures, while at the same time controlling the opposition: especially Shia and liberal democracy activists were suppressed.

'Abd Allah initiated reforms at home, but is unlikely to be remembered as a great reformer. He limited the religious establishment's power, promoted women's rights, established new universities and built infrastructure. Yet many Saudis hoped that 'Abd Allah would force through more substantive changes related to social issues, education and youth. Saudi women still cannot drive, minorities experience persistent discrimination, the education sector needs profound reform, and youth still struggle to get a foothold in the job market. Not least has the royal family retained all power and ordinary Saudis have few opportunities to express themselves or exert real political influence.

The royal family will remember 'Abd Allah as a ruler who – like his predecessors – promoted his own sons at the expense of other family branches, especially the Al Sudayri. He placed his sons in key positions. Not least, 'Abd Allah had ambitions on behalf of his son Mitab, whom he appointed to head the National Guard in 2013 – and groomed him as a future ruler of Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously, 'Abd Allah took some steps to reduce corruption among and limit the privileges of the royals.

Continuity rather than change

On the same day as he became king Salman promised in a nationally televised speech to follow the path of his predecessors. "We will continue adhering to the correct policies which Saudi Arabia has followed since its establishment", he said.

Salman is unlikely to make any radical changes in the country's foreign policy, which has remained remarkably unchanged since the time of Ibn Sa'ud. This reflects

a consensus within the royal family on their view of the world – and Saudi Arabia's place in it. National security issues dominate Salman's agenda: Yemen to the south is collapsing, the Islamic State (IS) to the north is threatening the kingdom, and Iran is closing in. Given these dangers, the Saudis will continue to lean on the U.S. and there is reason to believe that bilateral relations will improve under Salman. Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayif has close ties to the U.S., cooperating in dealing with regional conflicts and the "war on terror". In addition, Crown Prince Muqrin – who was educated in the U.S. – has a good relationship with the Americans. Salman has so far continued his predecessor's efforts to stem IS and Iranian influence in the Middle East. To counter these challenges, Salman has consulted with the leaders of the other Gulf monarchies, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey with the aim of creating a "Sunni bloc". Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and the FJP have been a central theme in these conversations, because this movement has been a particular source of discord among the aforementioned countries. This peaked in 2014 when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar in protest against the latter's support for the Brotherhood.

So far oil policy has also remained unchanged. In the choice between reducing oil production to benefit from

higher oil prices and increasing production to win market share, Salman has continued with the latter strategy. Saudi Arabia also has limited capacity to counter the recent oil price drop, which is driven by a surplus on the supply side. If the Saudis cut domestic production and drive up the price in the short term, other players will increase their production and drive the price down again in the longer term. Moreover, Saudi Arabia also benefits from the low oil price because investments in alternative energy and shale oil are less attractive. The country has no government debt and large foreign exchange reserves, and can thus afford low oil prices. To signal continuity in the country's oil policy, Salman has so far kept 79-year-old oil minister 'Ali al-Naimi in office.

It is too early to tell whether Salman – like 'Abd Allah – is a cautious reformer unwilling to change direction too quickly or whether he will introduce more substantial changes to domestic policies. Saudis belonging to all social groups – Islamists, liberals, women, youth, Shia, and others – expect and demand reform. Saudi Arabia's long-term stability depends on strong and visionary leadership that addresses the concerns of these disgruntled groups. Nevertheless, given the considerable geopolitical challenges that the kingdom is currently facing, it is likely that in the short term the king will prioritise national security above reform. ■

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