Succession in Saudi Arabia and What It Means for the Future of Saudi Policy

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ROBERT MASON, APR 29 2014

Saudi Arabia, through virtue of being a monarchy based on the tenets of Islam, puts the ruling family, the al-Saud, front and centre of Saudi political decision making. This is all the more the case since the King is also the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. Succession in Saudi Arabia is designed for the purpose of ensuring a smooth transition of state leadership, but it is always a complex affair, taking into consideration a number of variables. The ailing health of King Abdullah (90) and Crown Prince Salman (77), deputy prime minister and defence minister, once again puts Saudi succession in the spotlight. Further attention was generated in the international press when King Abdullah appointed Prince Muqrin (70), former Head of Intelligence (2005-12), as second in line to the throne in April 2014.

Saudi succession is particularly important because the al-Saud continue to face a myriad of substantial policy challenges which will require strong and experienced leadership. These challenges include ensuring high oil revenues are channelled into delivering major economic diversification projects at home, such as the proposed $100 billion solar and civilian nuclear programme. Regionally, the imperatives of being a leading oil exporter, its role conception, de-facto Islamic leadership position, actions by some Saudi fighters in Syria, and relations with many of the state and non-state actors involved requires it to contribute to the timely resolution of that conflict. The historic rivalry and sectarian struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran also makes Riyadh increasingly wary of the Iranian nuclear programme.

On the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia is attempting to enhance Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) cohesion and integration amid instances of foreign policy divergence. Internationally, Saudi Arabia is attempting to balance an increasing number of unresolved challenges and threats in its regional environment with effective political relations with the USA, versus the longer term attraction of closer political relations with the growing Asian oil markets. The existential nature of some of these challenges, coupled with existing rules of succession, are a major consideration which tends to prevent a younger generation of Princes from quickly rising to take on senior posts. These are the great grandsons of Abdel Aziz bin Saud (1876-53), who founded the third Saudi state in 1932.

There does appear to be some movement though. Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (54) was made Interior Minister after his father, who also held that position (as well as being Crown Prince), died in 2012. Prince Bandar bin Sultan was relieved of his position as Head of Intelligence on 15 April 2014, possibly due to ill health (he has not been seen in public since his shoulder operation earlier in the year) and amid allegations that he was not able to deliver a satisfactory solution on the Syrian conflict. His portfolio has been transferred to an obscure deputy called Yousef al-Adrisi (a non-Royal) while he stays on as the nominal head of Saudi Arabia's National Security Council. His work directing Saudi strategy on Syria is now a part Prince Nayef's responsibilities. The fact that President Obama and his senior staff met with Prince Nayef in February 2014, in the run up to President Obama's visit to meet King Abdullah in Riyadh, bestows a great amount of credibility on him to take on even more responsibility in future.

Prince Bandar, who spent more than two decades as Saudi Ambassador to the USA, could yet make a return to public life. Prince Muqrin is an example of that, and also that an heir to the throne does not have to have a mother from a Saudi tribe. Mixed marriages are in fact the bedrock of the Saudi Kingdom, designed to unite diverse tribes

and stabilise the political system. Therefore, being from a Yemeni tribe rather than a Saudi one is not as significant as it might first appear, especially when coupled with other important attributes such as popularity, acumen, and experience.

Many of the possible future succession scenarios are not only based on what happens behind closed doors in Riyadh, but also the chronology of events and maintaining a tribal balance amongst the contenders. The result is a consensual approach which fulfils the basic principles and interests of the main power centres, both political and religious. However, should Prince Muqrin eventually appoint the current King Abdullah's son as the new Crown Prince, it will finally shift power into the grandson bracket. Mitab Bin Abdullah (62) is currently Head of the National Guard (which has been equivalent to a Ministry since May 2013).

A Generational Shift in Saudi Policy?

Domestically, the premise of al-Saud rule would be unlikely to change at all with the introduction of younger decision makers in the inner circle of power, notwithstanding pressures from the Arab Spring. Whilst some scholars expect the imminent collapse of the Gulf monarchies, the oil windfall from the last decade, domestic economic policies (such as Nitaqat, the two-year programme set up in 2013 to ensure private sector employers hire a minimum number of Saudis through a quota system), and a reordering of the international system (favouring the BRICs) is likely to buy the Kingdom more autonomy and more time (Davidson 2012).

The next generation of Saudi rulers could start to conceive their role differently and more in line with the gradualist reforms taking place in Morocco (King Mohammed IV of Morocco is 50) and Jordan (King Abdullah of Jordan is 52). The space for that trend to establish itself is already underway. For example, the GCC is currently exploring the formation of a military bloc with Jordan and Morocco as a solution to its lack of manpower. Consequently, there is potential for a reform-inducing osmosis effect which could contribute to a Saudi, and therefore GCC, policy reorientation over the longer term. At the grass roots level, if Jordanians and Moroccans gain greater freedoms and secure political reforms, Saudi nationals could begin demanding something similar, which would also have a knock-on effect on policy orientation. The strategic relationship between the GCC and Turkey, established in 2008, could also lead to a similar societal impact.

Youth is no guarantee to re-orientating Saudi policy, but by accumulating policy experience or by learning from public reactions to official Saudi responses to the Arab Spring within the Kingdom, some younger members of the al-Saud family may be persuaded to become more progressive in outlook in some or all of the public spheres. For example, Saudi Arabia imposed a ban on all protests in 2011 and maintains a ban on women drivers, despite protests against such a ban. In the economic sphere, attention will be paid to government policies such as $130 billion in state spending to address potential unrest regarding salaries, unemployment, and skills. Politically, the Arab Spring is likely to continue to add to existing calls for institutional reforms and democratisation (beyond the increasingly democratic and women-friendly Majlis Al-Shura, or Consultative Council, which first met in 1994) (Cordesman 2003, 131-161). As the al-Saud attempts to remain impervious to forces which may compromise its political legitimacy, its responses ,such as alliance building outside of the GCC, could inject reformist influences which may become increasingly difficult to counter.

References

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