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The Saudi Succession Puzzle

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Who after? Democracies are often confronted by this question, especially after a strong and powerful leader. This is so when democracies tend to have arrangements for orderly power transfers and even leaders-in-waiting. Succession is a far more serious problem in the Middle East where state security is often co-terminus with regime survival.

Hence, when King Abdullah bin-Abdul Aziz decided to go to the US last November for a complete medical check-up because of a slip disc and accumulated blood clot, the region worked into frenzy with rumours, anxieties and uncertainties. Initial reports indicated that the surgery was successful and the King moved to Morocco for convalescence. This, however, could not last and on 23 February Abdullah rushed home in the wake of regional upheavals especially in next door Bahrain.

Both the King and Crown Prince Sultan are octogenarians and Prince Nayif, who is the third in the line of succession, is not young either. Riyadh Governor Prince Salman, fourth in the line of succession, is not healthy. Indeed, Prince Sultan returned to the Kingdom to take over administrative responsibilities only hours before the departure of the King to the US. For close to two years, the Crown Prince himself was convalescing in Morocco following treatment for reported cancer. Some fear that, given his deteriorating health, he might not even ascend the throne, or, should he make it, would reign only briefly.

In some ways, the current Saudi situation is reminiscent of the dying days of the Soviet Union when Moscow witnessed a march-past of leaders who died in office. This is largely because Saudi Arabia has seen only its founder King Abdul Aziz and his sons as rulers. Through multiple marriages, most of them political in nature, Abdul Aziz fathered at least 36 sons and 21 daughters. Since 1953 five of his sons have been kings. For example, Hammud, the youngest son

of the founder, is 63 years old. This leaves the country with a peculiar situation where uncertainty and questions are periodically raised over the long-term survivability of the al-Saud.

The royal family is equally concerned and conscious of the aging nature of the rulers and their health and, accordingly, has been making institutional arrangements for a smooth and orderly succession. Since the appointment of Abdul Aziz's eldest surviving son Saud to the post in 1932, the Crown Prince has succeeded the King. In addition, there is the heir to the heir apparent or second deputy Prime Minister (in Saudi Arabia, the King is also the Prime Minister and the Crown Prince holds the office of Deputy Prime Minister) is the third in the line of succession.

Until now this arrangement has worked effectively. Abdullah, for example, became second Deputy Prime Minister in 1975 following the death of King Faisal and became the Crown Prince in 1982 upon the death of King Khalid. Indeed, he was the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia since January 1996 when King Fahd suffered a major stroke and was incapacitated. The same kind of progress has been made by Sultan who became the heir to the heir apparent in 1982 and was made the Crown Prince when his half-brother Abdullah became the king.

In recent years, conscious of the aging nature of the dynasty the al-Sauds have introduced some additional changes. According to a new Basic Law introduced in March 1992, "rulers of the country shall be from among the sons of the founder King Abdul Aziz ... and their descendants" and that "the most upright among them shall receive allegiance" from the members of the al-Saud family. In short, the succession is moving from the horizontal to the vertical line, and seniority alone will not be the criterion. The additional condition of such a person being "upright" is seen by many as an euphemism for being acceptable to the wider royal household.

To further consolidate the process, shortly after ascending to the throne, King Abdullah added a new institution: *hay'at al-bay'ah* or Allegiance Commission. Announced in October 2006, it enables princes to have a say in the selection of future kings and thereby formalize the succession process. Chaired by the oldest surviving son of the founder, it includes sons and grandsons of Abdul Aziz. Anticipating any eventuality, King Abdullah also visualized a transitory ruling council if either the monarch or heir apparent were unable to rule. Under such a situation, five members of the Allegiance Commission will temporarily take over the responsibility for the affairs of the state for a week before a permanent arrangement is made.

If one compares the Saudi example with other countries in the region, the importance of the office of the Crown Prince becomes more acute. Despite not having a child, the Omani ruler has not named a crown prince or potential successor. Both King Hussein and his son Abdullah have changed the crown prince of Jordan to suit their immediate family concerns, by replacing their brothers with their own sons and thereby ensuring the succession of their immediate offspring.

Survival is more critical to the al-Saud family than to the rest of the world. As Joseph Kechichian, a keen royal watcher and author of *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, aptly put it: the royal family has "reached a very high level of political maturity."

This does not mean, however, there will not be jockeying for power, if not an outright power struggle. There are definite signs to indicate this. In recent weeks the sons of a number of influential princes have returned home. Prince Mutaib taking over full responsibility for the powerful National Guards from his father King Abdullah has to be seen in this context. Since its founding in 1962, Abdullah has been its commander and did not relinquish this position even after he became the King in 2005. Likewise, other influential princes have appointed their respective sons as deputies to ministries held by them; Crown Prince Sultan's son is his deputy at the Ministry of Defence; and the same holds true for Nayif who, besides being the third in the line of succession, heads the powerful Interior Ministry. Hence, many princes and their sons will be competing to position themselves and thus influence the succession.

There are speculations that the al-Saud might skip a generation and select someone suitable among the great grandsons of the founder. Should this happen, the choice will widen and so will be the competition. The current strength of the royal household is estimated at over 5,000 princes and princesses.

Conscious of the impending situation, King Abdullah has sought to reform and streamline the system. By establishing an organized process of selection and factoring in contingencies, he is hoping for a smooth and orderly transition. But age and health are not on his side and the current wave of political unrest in the region has only complicated the challenges facing King Abdullah.

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