

COMMENTARY

No. 52

Friday, 22 June 2012

What's Next for Saudi Arabia?

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Last Saturday, the Saudi crown prince, Prince Nayef Bin Abdul-Aziz died at age 78, apparently from complications of diabetes. The official media of the kingdom assumed an air of mourning and spoke of the death of the prince as a "loss to the homeland". For many years Prince Nayef has been a cornerstone of the of the Saudi family regime, because he fulfilled a number of key roles: Minister of the Interior (36 years), under deputy to the prime minister (3 years) and Crown Prince (less than one year). In his various roles he actively supervised matters of internal security, pilgrimage, religion and overseeing the media. His political importance mainly stemmed from having taken a hard line against the regime's domestic opposition, from the liberals to al-Qaeda, from the feminists to the Shias. He was worthy of the titles "Strongman" and "Support of the Regime" that he was given.

About one year ago the kingdom lost the previous crown prince, Nayef's brother Sultan, who was 86 years old. One brother, King Abdullah, is 89 years old, but there are those who think that he is in his 92nd year, and his health is unstable: during the funeral prayer for Nayef, in Mecca, the king sat on a chair instead of standing, as is customary, because of the burden of his years, the effects of disease, the stress of the kingship and the death of his younger brother, which factors, combined, made it difficult for him to stand. Some friends came to the funeral to support him: the Amir of Kuwait, Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, head of the Supreme Council of the Egyptian military, Field marshal Hussein Tantawi, the head of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas, the present prime minister of Lebanon - Najib Mikati, and the previous one - Saad al-Hariri as well as other heads of Arab and Islamic states. Those who get fat checks from him often.

An important detail of the funeral of Nayef is the fact that he was buried in Mecca, despite that the family is not originally from Mecca, which is in the Hijaz, but from Riyadh, in the Najad area. Nayef is the third Amir who was buried in Mecca of the sons of the founder of the kingdom, Abdul-Aziz, after two of Nayef's brothers were buried there: Mansur, who was minister of defence and Majid who was governor of the Mecca region. Some of Abdul-Aziz's grandchildren are already buried in Mecca (they were not so young either). It is worthy of note that the sons of Najid who are buried in Mecca are buried in a cemetery specifically designated for them, which is called *Maqbarat al-adal*, Cemetery of the Just, meaning godly justice. Tribalism - it seems - exists even in death. Their devotion to Mecca stems from their desire to show their reverence for the Islamic holy places, reflecting the nickname of the king as "The Servant of the Two Holy Places", Mecca and Medina.

The Dirty Business of the King's Replacement

Hayat al-Bi'a - "the Council of the Declaration of Faith" - was established a number of years ago, and its senior members are princes from the generation of the sons and the generation of the grandsons of the founder of the kingdom, Abdul-Aziz ibn-Saud, for whom the kingdom is named. The role of the council is to deal with the senior appointments of the state, to assure that only the candidates who are the most talented and most acceptable to all will reach the head of the pyramid of power in the kingdom. Prince Mashal, the king's brother, heads the council, which is supposed to meet in the near future, in order to choose a new crown prince. Prince Salman, who is 76 years old and minister of defence, is the apparent choice, or it may be the 71-year-old Prince Ahmad, who officiates in the role of deputy minister of interior.

The struggle among the sons of Abdul-Aziz is difficult and stormy, and is accompanied by intrigues, coalitions and manipulations, all of which occur behind the scenes; only the bottom line becomes known to the public, such as the firing of Prince Abdul-Rahman, deputy minister of defence, or Prince Talal's slamming the door after the king named Nayef to be the under deputy of the prime minister, despite the fact that he wasn't recommended by the Bi'a Council.

The fact that Abdul-Rahman and his brother, Muta'ib, did not come to congratulate Nayef on his new position and declare their loyalty was very meaningful, because Nayef dared to bypass Muta'ib, who is older than he is, for the position of deputy prime minister, and Abdul-Rahman was angry because Salman was named minister of security after the death of Sultan. Complicated? Perhaps, but it seems that the advanced years of these aged princes does not diminish the craving for power or their rivalry for honour, which is reminiscent of the rivalries between the relatives and cronies of the heads of power of past empires: the Roman, Byzantine, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman, which collapsed as a result of - among other reasons - squabbles of this sort.

However, everyone remembers that the king appointed Nayef without the Council of Bi'a, and it may be that he will surprise everyone again, this time with a choice from among the generation of the grandsons to be crown prince. Everyone knows that the day will come when the last of the brothers - the sons of Abdul-Aziz will pass away, and there will be no choice but to name one of the many grandsons. If this occurs without the presence of a "responsible adult" from the generation of the sons, the grandsons may bicker over the coveted position of king. Therefore the possibility exists that the present king will expedite the "succession of the generations" by naming a crown prince, who will become the next king when the time comes, according to his own choice. The question in the background is "from which grandmother - wife of Abdul-Aziz" - will a future king be chosen to sit on the royal throne, because there is a hierarchy among the grandmothers.

A great number of grandsons, aged approximately in the sixties, already fulfil important roles in the governmental system, mainly as deputy ministers, and each time one of the sons' generation is brought to his final rest, every one of the grandsons sees himself as the likely candidate for upgrade. The most coveted position after the kingship is Minister of the Interior, since whoever serves in this role sits at the nerve centre of state administration. This is how Prince Nayef, who was the dominant and actual ruler of the kingdom for more than thirty years, designed it in recent decades.

The members of the ruling family in Saudi Arabia are traditional, passionate and very resistant to change, and it's not clear if the king will take radical steps, like naming a young prince, with whatever talents he may have, to the role of crown prince. Rather, biology, years and illness impose themselves upon all of the events, and the recent cases of deaths among senior officials - the death of two crown princes, Sultan and Nayef, within eight months of each other - may undermine the stability of the family and consequently, the stability of the monarchy. One possible candidate from among the grandsons is Mukran, the head of intelligence, however he is nearing 70. The generation of the grandsons is not only younger but is also different from the point of view of their educational background, since many of them spent years in the West studying in leading universities. The leading names in this group are Khalid and Turki, sons of King Faizal, Mahmoud bin Nayef, Bandar bin Sultan (the past ambassador in Washington), Abdul-Aziz bin Fahd, Abdul-Aziz son of the current king Abdullah, and there are many more.

Challenges

The crown prince will have to cope - perhaps soon, as king - with the difficult and volatile situation in the region and especially in Syria, the Iranian threat on Saudi Arabia and the other states of the Gulf, and the status of the monarchy in the region and in the world, as the state that exports the greatest quantity of oil.

In the internal arena, the king will need to cope with the contradictory and conflicting trends that are exerting great influence on Saudi society: on one side - the increasing demand to carry out political reforms based on expanding the number of recipients of the government pie beyond the family of King Abdul-Aziz, founder of the monarchy, in order to give opportunities to other talented people; to bring about a more just division of the wealth of the kingdom, mainly pertaining to the income from oil; to sever the connection between the legal system and the ruling family, so that the court will be seen as more just and legitimate in the eyes of the people; to broaden the circle of institutions that are chosen by the public and to increase their authorities; to separate the branches of government, and improve the monitoring of performance through a legislative authority and free, independent and effective oversight. A "state family" does not easily accept changes of this sort, which might undermine its power within the state systems.

The public demand for internal changes increased during the past year following the events of the "Arab Spring", when the people of Saudi Arabia saw, by live broadcast, how the Tunisian, Egyptian, Yemenite and Syrian throngs streamed into the streets with the demand to overthrow the head of the pyramid of power and to bring about economic, social and political justice.

These demands are driven by the economic situation in Saudi Arabia, which differs greatly from the image of the rich kingdom: unemployment, mainly among the young and educated is high, which has severe ramifications on their ability to establish a family. As a result of this, many of the young remain unmarried or try to emigrate, and others commit suicide. Saudi Arabia is one of the last states in the world that lacks a constitution with provisions for the division of powers among the branches of government, an elected parliament, freedom of the press, the right to public demonstration, freedom to form political and professional organizations, and a woman's right to act in the public domain without gender-specific limitations.

The modern media, chiefly the social networks, enable the youth of the kingdom to express themselves, and their demands arise and increase, and take the form of petitions demanding that the monarchy conduct political reforms, bring about social justice, free prisoners of conscience and do away with the governmental, economic and religious monopolies that are all bound up with one another. Recently a few demonstrations and strikes have been organized - despite the ban on their existence - in universities and in front of the offices of the government and labour offices, against corruption, tyranny and unemployment. In one case, despite its explicit prohibition, a huge demonstration was organized against administrative imprisonment without trial.

The media, both local and, unfortunately, global, remain silent and blind to these events and their implications. It seems that the world prefers Saudi Arabia to remain always beyond the mountains of darkness, far from global culture, so that its stability will be ensured and the oil will continue to flow to the opulent West, which is addicted to Saudi oil and its products.

The Status of Women and the Morality Police

There are two cultural issues that are simultaneously burdening Saudi society: the issue of the status of woman and her freedoms, and the role played by the "agency for commanding the good and forbidding the evil", which is the notorious Morality Police, whose main activities are primarily associated with women, gender and modesty. The matter recently rose to the headlines after a video clip was recorded on a cellular telephone, in which a Saudi woman is confronted with a group of people from the Morality Police, who accuse her of a terrible crime: that she dared to go out to shop in the mall, with fingernails – goodness gracious! - painted. She defends herself by repeating again and again that she was born free, and that she can paint her fingernails; they left her alone after they realized that they were being recorded.

The question of women driving is disturbing, because many of the women of Saudi Arabia who have lived abroad have a driver's license, and the prohibition of driving a car places them effectively under house arrest or makes them dependent on a paid driver or a male member of the family. The issue of the Morality Police is complicated because they harass anyone whose views do not agree with those of the regime, by accusing him of heresy. By investigating what Saudis write on social networking sites, the police present "proof" against the "heretics", who are then put on trial for what they wrote. Even worse is that the Morality Police enlist the aid of informers from among the public, so that many people in Saudi Arabia feel that they are not free to say what they feel even in the privacy of their own homes.

The reliance of the regime on the Morality Police is the "tax" which the Saudi family pays to the religious establishment, principally the religious scholars of the families of bin Baz and ibn Alat'min, and this alliance of religion and state is anathema to most of the population.

The Shias

In Eastern Saudi Arabia, in the oil-rich region of Hasah, live the members of the Shia minority. The Sunni rulers, members of the Hanbali-Wahabbi population, view Shi'ism as a kind of heresy against Islam, and place many limitations upon them. The Shias are forbidden to call the *adhan*, the call to prayer, from the minarets of the mosques, and they are forbidden to publicly mark the day of the *Ashura*, the day on which, in 680 CE, al-Hussein bin Ali, was murdered by the forces of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid. The Shias in Saudi Arabia, in spite of being Arabs, are routinely accused of loyalty to Iran and treason against the homeland. In recent months the Alawites in Syria have been added to the list of targets for Saudi media, because - ultimately - they are also heretics.

The Issue of Identity

This issue is apparently the most severe of all the issues exerting their influence on the society in the kingdom. National identity is defined by a group of values, ideals and principles which together, constitute an identity of individuals as well as groups among the people, and these are expressed in its art, culture, literary creations, philosophy and history. Some of these components are fixed and stable, but others integrate changes that are occurring within the cultural environment of the people.

In Saudi Arabia, the youth, who constitute the majority of the population, can be divided into three groups according to their cultural identity: the first group has a traditional nature, characterized by customs and social traditions specific to them, mainly the adherence to tribal culture, which has lately increased among the public and the media. The increasing awareness of the tribal unit among those tribes who are not part of the coalition of the Saudi family, results in increasing self-awareness and independence, isolating them from the state, which is not theirs. The second group integrates religious values with imported values which appeal mainly to the younger generation. One can see many young people coming to prayers in the mosques wearing jeans and western hair styles, and in their pockets are cell phones that contain material inconsistent with the values of Islam. These young people do not represent a stable element of society, and their conduct can change within short periods of time. The third group comprises youths who are increasingly attracted to the radical side of religion, which they feel is the proper compass to guide the individual, the society and the state. This group views tribal culture, and especially the tribal ruler, negatively, mainly because of rumours of the immoral behaviour of some members of the royal family.

To all of these groups we must add the millions of foreign workers who reside permanently in the kingdom, most of whom - whether from Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, or the Arab world - work under difficult conditions and for very low wages, and many times must cope with humiliating and degrading treatment from their Saudi employers. Foreign women who work as housekeepers in Saudi Arabia are treated with a double portion of humiliation and exploitation. The identity of the foreign workers with the state is no greater than the salary that they receive for their services.

The ruling family is well aware of the various trends among the population, and tries to buy the public and their loyalty with "charity" money that it distributes to whomever it pleases. A caricature making the rounds on the Internet expresses the situation well.

In light of the situation in which the kingdom must stand up to external challenges, principally an Iranian threat on the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia, it is not clear whether the population of the kingdom will indeed lend strong support to the leadership of the ruling family. It is not clear how dear this family is to the hearts of the public, or how much the public identifies with it and with the aging, shabby governmental system that runs the state. Will the citizens of Saudi Arabia

agree to pay the price of war with Iran only to leave the sons and the grandsons of the House of Saud exclusively in power? Does Iranian self confidence in relation to the Gulf states stem from a sense of weakness emanating from Saudi Arabia? Does the tense atmosphere that reigns recently between the royal family and the White House in Washington stem from some doubt in the hearts of Americans about the value of investing in the "State of the Saud Family"? The future holds the answers.

Note: This article was originally published in Hebrew in *Makor Rishon* and the English translations is reproduced here with permission of the author. Web link: <http://israelagainstterror.blogspot.co.il/2012/06/mordechai-kedar-whats-next-for-saudi.html>

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