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Another Saudi Actuarial Disaster

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Foreign Policy

June 18, 2012

Washington woke on Saturday to the news of the death of Crown Prince Nayef, who was next in line for the Saudi throne. The collective sigh of relief by senior U.S. officials was almost audible -- even though, within hours, President Barack Obama issued a statement about his "great regret" on learning the news.

The president emphasized the positive. Under Nayef's leadership of the Interior Ministry, the statement said, "the United States and Saudi Arabia developed a strong and effective partnership in the fight against terrorism." Obama also noted that Nayef had "strongly supported the broader partnership between our two countries."

There was no mention of the stark reality: Nayef was renowned for being difficult and unimaginative, only able to view policy options in terms of choices that worsened problems rather than eased them. His support for the kingdom's religious conservatives during his decades in office had arguably only added to jihadi extremism. He labeled Shiites in the Eastern Province protesting at their lack of rights as "acting at the behest of a foreign country," thereby provoking a confrontation with Iran rather than side-stepping it.

One took on Nayef at one's own peril, so few did. He was outraged when Abdullah, upon becoming king in 2005, failed to make him second deputy prime minister, a slot seen as "crown-prince-in-waiting." Abdullah had wanted to limit the power of his brother princes in the so-called Sudairi faction, whom, he felt, had spent decades undermining him. Nevertheless, he found himself having to appoint Nayef's full-brother Sultan as his own heir apparent -- as the largest group of full-brothers in the royal family, Abdullah just could not ignore the Sudairis.

But Nayef bided his time, waiting for Saudi Arabia's creaky succession system to work in his favor. He dutifully managed his portfolio at the Interior Ministry and, by 2009, with Sultan's health declining as well as the king's, was finally awarded the second deputy prime minister title. When Sultan died of cancer last October, Nayef's own real opposition was a couple of older brothers who could be discounted as political nonentities.

Along with Nayef, there probably also dies media interest in the escapades of one of his ex-wives, Maha al-Sudairi, who was stopped earlier this month as she was leaving a Paris hotel in the middle of the night, along with a personal retinue of 60 and attendant luggage, without settling the \$8 million bill. (Princess Maha has something of a track record for this sort of behavior but the incident dwarfs an earlier tale about her selection of \$100,000 worth of lingerie, which went unpaid for.)

Perhaps the imaginative British tabloid press will report that Nayef's actual demise -- it appears to have been a heart attack -- was prompted by being told he needed to write yet another check to cover Maha's extravagances. Although reportedly suffering from cancer, Nayef was not thought to be on death's door. Indeed, just last week he had been visited in his Geneva residence by a group that included the Saudi minister of labor and the kingdom's representative to the World Trade Organization. His full-brother Ahmad, who has been promoted to head the Interior Ministry in Nayef's place, was quoted earlier this month as saying Nayef was in "good health" and would be returning to the kingdom "soon."

The House of Saud has yet to meet a problem it doesn't want to kick down the road, and slotting Prince Ahmad, 72, into Nayef's old job as interior minister fits the bill nicely. Leadership of Saudi ministries is handled as if they are feudal fiefdoms rather than modern bureaucracies: When Sultan, who doubled as minister of defense as well as crown prince, died, his brother Salman, the newly minted crown prince, filled the gap. Ahmad and Salman, who are also Sudairis, would not want the leadership of such an important ministry going to a non-Sudairi half-brother, such as Prince Muqrin, the 69-year old head of intelligence and close confidant of King Abdullah.

Tapping Ahmad avoids promoting a grandson of the kingdom's founder Abdul-Aziz, also known as Ibn Saud, to being a full minister. Among the next generation of Saudi princes, there is intense competition for such a prestigious role in a major ministry. The heavyweights in this contest are Mitab bin Abdullah, the 59-year old son of the king and commander of the National Guard; Khalid bin Sultan, the 63-year old son of the late crown prince and deputy defense minister; and Muhammad bin Fahd, the 62-year old son of the late King Fahd and governor of the Eastern Province, the home of the kingdom's oil wealth as well as its pesky Shiites.

Another one to watch is the counterterrorism chief, the 53-year old Muhammed bin Nayef. If merit were a critical factor in senior appointments, he perhaps should be the next minister for his work in eradicating al Qaeda from Saudi Arabia. MbN, as he is known to U.S. officials, has actually been bloodied in his job, surviving the 2009 attempted embrace of a suicide bomber who had hidden explosives in a body orifice.

Therein lies the fundamental problem with leadership of the kingdom: Its succession mechanism is an actuarial disaster area. Notionally, the throne should pass from brother to brother (actually usually half-brother) among the sons of Ibn Saud, who died in 1953. Only sons who are unwilling or universally accepted as being incompetent are jumped. But the system means that Saudi monarchs are getting progressively older -- with all that means in terms of energy for the role and mental acuity.

Since Ibn Saud, the kings of Saudi Arabia have been Saud, Faisal, Khalid, Fahd and Abdullah. Exact ages are disputable but, accepting that, the trend for age on accession to the throne is still unmistakable: 51, 60, 63, 61, 82. The trend line for the age at which they

were appointed crown prince is similar: 31, 49, 53, 54, 59.

If we add Sultan and Nayef, crown princes who died before becoming king, to the series, the problem becomes even clearer. The two princes assumed the role at 81 and 78 respectively -- and Salman is still a worrying 76 years old.

The kings of Saudi Arabia are graying, and look to become even grayer in the years ahead. The logical way to resolve this problem is to allow the succession system to jump down to the next generation. It arguably should happen but almost certainly won't -- personal ambition of individual princes outweighs their appreciation of their mutual interest. Given Saudi Arabia's centrality in the Middle East, if not the world, that may turn out to be to the detriment of all of us.

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Note: This op-ed was originally published by Foreign Policy under a title that does not reflect The Washington Institute's point of view.