

Policy Alert

Fresh Concerns about Health of Saudi King

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Saudi Arabia's aging leadership is in transition, potentially hindering Washington's policies on Syria and Iran.

This morning, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia left the country for an undisclosed destination after deputizing Crown Prince Salman to take over his responsibilities in his absence. The reason for the trip has not been revealed, but there is widespread speculation that the eighty-eight-year-old king will head to New York City for medical treatment, perhaps after a brief stop in Morocco. He had operations for a back complaint in 2010 and 2011, and he was almost bent double while standing during an Islamic summit in Mecca two weeks ago. Photographs showed him in obvious discomfort as he left the kingdom today.

Despite the lack of information about the trip, now is a good time to examine Saudi Arabia's regional role and relationship with the United States. The Obama administration sees King Abdullah as a crucial ally in several fields. In Syria, Riyadh is providing arms to the anti-Assad rebels. In the oil market, it has expanded production to offset the drop in Iranian exports caused by nuclear sanctions. Although Riyadh was reportedly disappointed with Washington's swift removal of support for longtime ally Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the kingdom appears to share many policy objectives with the United States. Washington undoubtedly views Saudi leadership of the Arab and Muslim worlds as useful, not to mention its role as a major oil supplier.

Having Crown Prince Salman stand in for the monarch is no particular relief. Although he serves as defense minister and is, at seventy-six, significantly younger than Abdullah, some have expressed concerns about his own health and his ability to focus on detail. An additional worry is that the House of Saud has no obvious crown-prince-in-waiting behind him. The need for such a candidate has become more urgent in the past year given the deaths of no fewer than two crown princes, Sultan and Nayef, who were half-brothers of Abdullah and full brothers of Salman, yet died within eight months of each other.

Saudi foreign policy capacity is already strained due to the ill health of longtime foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal. In his absence, the kingdom is being represented at this week's Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran by the king's son and deputy foreign minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah. It is unclear to what extent Prince Bandar bin Sultan's recent appointment as intelligence chief has boosted Saudi capabilities.

Meanwhile, the continuing threat of al-Qaeda terrorism in the kingdom became apparent this weekend with the announcement of arrests targeting terrorist cells in Riyadh and Jeddah. The suspects were mainly from Yemen, but the cell leaders were said to be Saudi. Police displayed a considerable amount of seized explosives for the press. The discovery of the cells, which were said to be targeting "security men, citizens, foreign residents, and public facilities," can probably be credited to Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the assistant interior minister for counterterrorism. He is reportedly very capable but has yet to be promoted to the vacant position of deputy interior minister, in part due to apparently intense competition for promotion among the sons of the current generation of leaders. The deputy interior position remains open after its previous incumbent, Prince Ahmed, was made interior minister after the death of Prince Nayef, who held that post while serving as crown prince.

Saudi help for Washington in terms of oil policy is another issue demanding attention. Although the kingdom has increased production to its highest level in many years, global prices remain stubbornly high, apparently because of Riyadh's preference to store extra volumes rather than put them on the market.

The short-term challenge is to work out who is the main point of contact: King Abdullah or Crown Prince Salman. In the longer term, Washington must ensure that it develops a good working relationship with whoever might emerge as a future crown prince -- and one day, probably sooner than later, as a future king.

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