SUDDEN SUCCESSION

Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East

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A Fifty-Year Reign?
MbS and the Future of Saudi Arabia

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud (MbS) is expected to eventually become king of Saudi Arabia, replacing his father, King Salman. But when, and under what circumstances, is hard to predict. This study examines the issues and mechanisms by which MbS may, or may not, become king.

THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY ▪ POLICY NOTE 63 ▪ APRIL 2019

The Current Situation

King Salman is eighty-three years old and appears to be in increasingly poor physical and mental health. Although he continues to have a packed schedule of meetings, such occasions appear carefully staged. He receives prompts for remarks on a screen often partially hidden by flowers set on a table. He also stoops when he is standing, and walks with a stick. When he addressed the Arab League–European Union summit in the Egyptian city of Sharm al-Sheikh in February 2019, he made embarrassing mistakes when reading his speech and, on at least one occasion, lost his place in the text until an aide assisted him.

For many months, MbS, thirty-four this year, has clearly been the top decisionmaker in the kingdom. The young royal has been crown prince and heir apparent since mid-2017, when he forced his cousin Prince Muhammad bin Nayef to resign. MbS had previously been deputy crown prince, a position to which he was promoted in April 2015—three months after his father succeeded to the throne on the death of King Abdullah.

Before that, MbS served as an advisor to his father starting in 2010. Three years later, he was made head of the crown prince's court and appointed a special advisor with the rank of minister. In 2014, he became a minister of state and a member of the Council of Ministers, as the cabinet is known.

King Salman has many other sons, of which two have already died but at least nine are still alive. They include former astronaut Prince Sultan (sixty-three), deputy oil minister Abdulaziz (fifty-nine), and provincial governor Faisal (forty-nine), who has a doctorate from Oxford University. One of MbS's younger full brothers, Khalid (thirty-one), appears to be the closest to the crown prince. KbS, as he is known, was made deputy minister of defense in February 2019, having served as ambassador in Washington DC beginning in 2017.

King Salman's choice of the much younger MbS as his heir is variously ascribed to his apparent belief that MbS has the character of the king's father, Abdulaziz, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, usually known as Ibn Saud. Or to Salman's particular fondness for MbS. Or to Salman's increasing dependence on and trust in the prince, who has always stayed close to his father.

History of Saudi Succession

In historical terms, King Salman is the twenty-second ruler of the al-Saud, the House of Saud. The first, Muhammad bin Saud, ruled from 1742 to 1765. However, were MbS to become king, it would mark a meaningful change in the system that has evolved over more than the last half-century (see table 1).

When King Abdulaziz died in 1953, he was replaced by his eldest son, Saud. But since then, the line of succession among the several thousand princes who make up the House of Saud has gone from brother to brother (actually half-brother to half-brother), in descending order of age, among the sons of King Abdulaziz (Ibn Saud).

Despite the appearance of continuity, individual reigns and transitions have often been marked by major challenges and crises:

- Ibn Saud was seventy-three when he died in 1953. He had spent the last few years of his life increasingly senile and in a wheelchair. For the

Table 1. Saudi main line of succession

King	Age at accession	Age at death/End of reign	Years of official reign
Saud	51	62	11
Faisal	60	71	11
Khalid	63	70	7
Fahd	61	84	23
Abdullah	82	92	10
Salman	79	n/a	n/a

final eight months, he delegated powers to his eldest son, Crown Prince Saud, and the Council of Ministers.

- King Saud ruled from 1953 to 1964, when he was forced to abdicate by royal family pressure at the age of sixty-two. Starting in 1958, overt tension surfaced between him and his immediate half-brother, Crown Prince Faisal, over how to administer the kingdom. He left the country in a wheelchair, living the rest of his days in exile and eventually dying in Greece.
- King Faisal was regarded as a modernizer, ending slavery and introducing television to the kingdom. In 1975, he was assassinated at age seventy-one by a nephew prince.
- King Khalid had been Faisal's crown prince. Khalid's elder full brother, Muhammad, had been passed over because of his bad temper and frequent drunkenness. Khalid wasn't interested in administration but was an able family conciliator. His reign was marked by his ill health and absences for medical treatment. He died in 1982, age seventy.
- King Fahd had been Khalid's crown prince and the effective head of government. He was the eldest of the Sudairi Seven princes, the largest group of full brothers among the more than forty sons of Ibn Saud. (King Salman is also a Sudairi—the moniker derives from the tribe of their mother.) Fahd ruled until 1995, when he was incapacitated by the first of several strokes. While Fahd remained king in name, Crown Prince Abdullah had become the effective head of government. Fahd eventually died in 2005, at age eighty-four.
- King Abdullah died in 2015 at age ninety-two. For his last few months, he was in a wheelchair and could only focus for an hour or two a day on his responsibilities.
- King Salman's health was questionable even before his accession. In the preceding years, while he was defense minister, foreign officials would only meet him for protocol reasons; more substantive discussions were held instead with other Saudi officials.

Analyzing the Reigns of Saudi Kings

The system of passing the throne from brother to brother, especially when combined with access to better healthcare, has led to sons of Ibn Saud becoming king at an increasingly old age. An additional effect, a consequence of kings staying on the throne until they die, is longer reigns, with the later years marked by ill health and declining ability.

The trend is even more obvious if the dates are adjusted to reflect when the prince had become de facto leader as either crown prince or king (see table 2).

The House of Saud is running out of those once-plentiful sons of Ibn Saud. The remaining ones (listed in table 3) are mainly in poor health, and several have non-Saudi mothers, a pedigree deemed a handicap.

Table 2. Effective years of leadership for Saudi monarchs

King	Year leadership began	Age leadership began	Years as effective leader
Abdulaziz (Ibn Saud)	1902	22	51
Saud	1953	51	5
Faisal	1958	54	17
Khalid	1975	63	0
Fahd	1975	54	20
Abdullah	1995	72	20
Salman	2015	79	?

Table 3. Years of birth and maternal linkages among the surviving sons of King Abdulaziz

Prince	Year of birth	Matrilineage
Bandar	1923	Non-Saudi
Mitab	1928	Non-Saudi
Abdulillah	1935	
Salman (King)	1936	
Ahmad	1940	
Mamdouh	1940	
Mashur	1942	Father of Sara, wife of MbS
Muqrin	1943	Non-Saudi, though crown prince in 2015

It was long argued that shifting succession to the next generation—the grandsons of Ibn Saud—was the answer to the actuarial challenge of princes only becoming kings when their best years had passed. Whether by accident or design, MbS has emerged as the solution to that challenge. If MbS were to become king soon, he could rule for fifty years, emulating his grandfather Ibn Saud, who founded the modern kingdom and saw the establishment of oil as its economic basis. Intentionally or otherwise, King Salman's reported vision of the young MbS as a modern Ibn Saud is an imaginative one that makes a measure of sense in historical terms.

What Makes a Good King?

Traditionally, members of the House of Saud have respected age and favored decisionmaking by consensus. A distillation of the attributes needed, until now, to be king of Saudi Arabia is as follows:[1]

- **AGE.** But not so old as to be in questionable health.
- **EXPERIENCE IN ADMINISTRATION.** Typically as a minister or governor.
- **REPUTATION AS A GOOD MUSLIM.** Code for the fact that, in the past, several princes have had alcohol problems.
- **HAVING A SAUDI MOTHER.** Some of Ibn Saud's offspring were born to non-Saudi slave girls or concubines.
- **ACUMEN, WISDOM.** The ability to make good decisions quickly.
- **POPULARITY.** The social skills needed to achieve royal family consensus.
- **STABILITY, SANITY.** The perception of an even temperament.

All kings so far have had Saudi mothers. The extent to which they have checked the other boxes has varied. Of the attributes, the most important has been a combination of age, experience, and ability to win consensus in the family. Looking ahead, it is self-evident that MbS does not have the age qualifying for seniority, his experience in administration has been intensive but short, and he appears to care little about achieving consensus support within the House of Saud.

The Mechanism for Succession

At the time of transition, usually signaled by the death of the monarch, the crown prince, as heir apparent, takes over the powers of the king until he receives the oath of allegiance (*baya*) from the other senior princes. The kingdom's religious leadership (*ulama*) then issues a fatwa affirming that the succession is legitimate and declares the new king a Muslim leader (imam).

But the way of selecting a new crown prince has seen changes. Historically, it was the next younger brother, provided he was deemed suitable by the other

sons of Ibn Saud. In 1992, however, King Fahd issued a Basic Law that defined the process in writing. The throne was declared to pass to the sons of the founding king, Ibn Saud, and their children's children. This was one way of saying what was already assumed: that the throne remains within the lineage of Ibn Saud. More contentiously, the law said that the king chooses the heir apparent and could relieve him of his duties by royal order. This formulation shocked then crown prince Abdullah, who had thought he was heir apparent by right rather than at the whim of King Fahd.

The Recent Politics of Succession

The background politics of succession have involved continued attempts by the Sudairi Seven to dominate the royal family and Abdullah's evident determination to become king and do whatever possible to thwart this group of princes. The seven princely full brothers were Fahd, Sultan, Abdulrahman, Nayef, Turki, Salman, and Ahmed—a formidable grouping. Fahd and now Salman became king; Sultan was a long-serving minister of defense; Nayef was an equally veteran minister of interior, which in the Saudi system means internal security. (Abdulrahman, Turki, and Ahmed are more marginal characters.) Apart from Salman, only Ahmed is still alive.

When Fahd initially fell ill in 1995, the other Sudairis successfully undermined Abdullah. His status as crown prince had been hard won, a consequence of his own strength of character and support from non-Sudairi princes, determined that the throne should not become a Sudairi monopoly. But, to his resentment, Abdullah was only officially regent for a few weeks at the beginning of 1996. His rivals insisted that Fahd remain in name the key decisionmaker, even though this was a fiction.

When Abdullah himself became king, he modified the system for appointing crown princes. In 2007, he set up an Allegiance Council, made up of the remaining offspring of Ibn Saud and the eldest descendants of the ancestor's already-deceased sons. It appeared to be a mechanism to deny Crown Prince Sultan the ability to choose his own crown prince when King Abdullah died.

As it turned out, Sultan predeceased Abdullah in 2011 and his replacement as crown prince, his brother Nayef, also predeceased Abdullah, dying in 2012. Abdullah could not, it seemed, block Salman from becoming crown prince, but as king he undermined that position by appointing another half-brother, Muqrin, as deputy crown prince in 2013. This in itself was a contentious appointment because, although Muqrin had considerable administrative experience as an air force commander, provincial governor, and intelligence chief, his mother—while being a formal wife of Ibn Saud—was Yemeni.

On the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, King Salman made Muqrin his crown prince and appointed Muhammad bin Nayef, known as MbN, as deputy crown prince. Three months later, Muqrin was sacked and replaced by MbN, and MbS was appointed deputy crown prince. This arrangement continued until mid-2017, when MbN was forced to resign and MbS became crown prince, but how the Allegiance Council formally approved the changes is not clear. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the body did not actually meet, with the votes taken by phone or collected by emissaries sent from the royal court. No deputy crown prince has been appointed to fill the slot left vacant by MbS's elevation, nor is there a new second deputy prime minister—the third highest position in the administrative hierarchy. (The king also serves as prime minister and the crown prince as deputy prime minister. The role of deputy prime minister has historically signified a crown-prince-in-waiting.)

The backstory to the changes since Salman became king, meanwhile, is judged to involve the slow, steady elevation of MbS and the sidelining of the system King Abdullah wanted to endure after his own death. In this interpretation, which is more than a theory but lacks proof, Abdullah had hoped that Salman would be passed over for king because of his declining health, allowing Muqrin to become monarch. In turn, Muqrin would have then appointed Mitab bin Abdullah, the king's son, as crown prince, making him a future king. Mitab was the minister for the National Guard, the praetorian unit that served as Abdullah's traditional power base and was designed to be a watchdog over the military.

In rising to become crown prince, MbS rang the death knell for the Abdullah camp's ambitions. Mitab's demise was complete a few months later, when on November 4, 2017, he was detained along with other princes and Saudi businessmen in the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton. He was fired as minister the same day but released a few weeks later, after reportedly transferring around $1 billion to the authorities. The money apparently came from the proceeds of commissions received over many years when buying equipment for the National Guard.[2]

What if MbS Doesn't Become King?

Although MbS is expected to be king, it is not inevitable. Opposition to him is thought to issue from within the royal family, either out of jealousy or, more likely, concern that his ruthless leadership style is putting the country or, more particularly, the House of Saud at risk. Also, the fate of King Faisal, killed by an angry nephew, suggests that the notion of assassination cannot simply be dismissed, however numerous the crown prince's bodyguards. Another possibility is that ill health, either temporary or permanent, could compel the family to consider alternative leadership. In their own way, each of these possibilities would be a crisis.

The outcome of any such situation would depend on a range of variables: Would the crisis emerge suddenly or gradually? Would King Salman be able to intervene actively in events? If the House of Saud is divided, where are the splits and how significant are they? The internal situation in the kingdom and the wider situation in the Middle East would also have an impact.

The existing formal mechanisms for coping with a transition are few. While the Allegiance Council may be called upon to rubber-stamp any resolution, the debate over what happens and, more important, who emerges as a new leader is likely to occur in more informal settings. A potentially crucial component is whether a prince or small group of princes could enforce their diktat by using security forces to intimidate other princes. There is a parallel here to 1963, when Crown Prince Faisal used the National Guard to surround the palace of King Saud, eventually forcing him to abdicate. It had been thought that the House of Saud would not want to repeat such circumstances. The experience of the November 2017 Ritz-Carlton arrests has changed this assumption, particularly with MbS controlling all the instruments of power.

Alternative Future Kings

When Salman wanted to get Allegiance Council endorsement for MbS's appointment as crown prince in 2017, he amended succession rules so that Salman's direct ascendants could not follow MbS. In other words, the direct line of succession from father to son, used only once before, in 1953, when Saud became king, would only be repeated once—when MbS became king. MbS's own sons—he has at least one, named Salman, still a child—would be ineligible, as would MbS's brothers. This also means that MbS's younger brother, KbS, to whom he is very close, would be ineligible. Yet it is the established Saudi system that a king can change the rules on any issue at any time, so this restriction may prove only temporary.[3]

At the time of writing, the significant princes to watch would appear to be:

- **MUHAMMAD BIN NAYEF.** Although sidelined since 2017, MbN makes occasional public appearances. He could still be a figurehead leader acceptable to members of the royal family concerned about how MbS has concentrated power and used it, both domestically and abroad. He was the first grandson of Ibn Saud to achieve the standing of heir apparent. Age sixty, he has diabetes and takes medication to cope with the lingering trauma of having survived a suicide attack by a terrorist who had a bomb hidden in a body orifice. This attacker was ostensibly surrendering to the prince when the bomb detonated. After the 9/11 attacks, MbN was in charge of counterterrorism and was regarded as a valued interlocutor with U.S. agencies. MbS reportedly forced him to concede the position of crown prince by taking away his diabetes medication and cell phones.[4]
- **MITAB BIN ABDULLAH.** Also humiliated by MbS, this prince—if he has any fight left in him—

could be another figurehead king or kingmaker. Age sixty-seven, he has been seen as an ally of MbN, appearing to share similar views on MbS. Because of his brief status as crown prince, MbN is more senior than Mitab despite being younger. After years of service in the National Guard, Mitab became its head after his father became king in 2005. Later, he served as minister for the National Guard when its structure was altered in 2013, a position he held until his incarceration in the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton in 2017.

- **AHMED BIN ABDULAZIZ.** The younger full brother of King Salman, he is the only surviving son of Ibn Saud seen as an even half-credible candidate to be king. As such, he could be a figurehead leader in a transition. Yet he is seventy-nine and regarded as feckless and disorganized—he allegedly had been fired as minister of interior by King Abdullah for chronic lateness to cabinet meetings. But a verbal altercation in 2018 between Ahmed and demonstrators in London was interpreted as showing public disapproval of MbS, making him a man to watch.

- **KHALID BIN SALMAN.** A younger full brother of the crown prince, KbS is viewed as MbS's closest and most trusted ally. Age thirty-one, he is back in Riyadh as deputy defense minister after two years as ambassador to Washington. A former F-15 pilot who flew missions over Yemen and against Islamic State targets, he is not a future crown prince unless the current rules change.

- **KHALID AL-FAISAL.** Governor of Mecca province and a son of the late King Faisal, he is considered a familiar face to King Salman. He was sent to Turkey to meet President Recep Tayyip Erdogan after Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. At seventy-eight, he is too old and too removed from the historical main line of succession to be a future king.

- **TURKI AL-FAISAL.** Former intelligence chief and younger half-brother of Khalid al-Faisal, Turki has served as ambassador in London and Washington and retains good contacts in both places. Age seventy-four, he has been used as an emissary by MbS since the murder of Khashoggi, who once worked for him as a media advisor in both Britain and the United States.

Given the king's health and distance from actual policymaking, media reports on policy differences between MbS and King Salman seem dubious. Rather, they may reflect attempts by marginalized princes to undermine MbS. The earlier-noted opposition within the royal family to the crown prince may be regarded as a given, but it is at present hard to quantify.

Despite his personal rather than team-oriented leadership style, MbS cannot govern, particularly at a provincial level, without the help of the royal family. Yet so far, with the exception of his brother KbS, newly promoted third-generation princes are not seen as competitors or rivals for leadership.[5]

Prospects for MbS

MbS faces various potential obstacles on his path to ascending the throne. Up to now, his proximity to the king has appeared to give him license to accrue increasing power and outplay his rivals. But assuming a further decline in King Salman's health and amid the crown prince's growing list of controversial actions, the monarch's ability to protect MbS from princely competitors may be reduced, potentially making him vulnerable.

In such circumstances, a speedy transition would seem to favor MbS. If the king dies, MbS theoretically would need the oath of allegiance to achieve the status of new king. If senior princes show reluctance to bestow this on him, his legitimacy would be questioned and a wider royal crisis could develop. If the king remains alive but cannot function, other alternatives would need to be considered should doubts widen over MbS's suitability.

Given the shame associated with King Saud's abdication in 1964, that option is probably unlikely. The Qatari route—wherein regional rival Emir Hamad al-Thani retired in 2013 and took the title of Father-Emir, while his son Tamim became ruler—would be too embarrassing for the Saudis, given the impres-

sion of copying it would suggest. A halfway route may entail the king giving up the role of prime minister. Or the king could retain the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques but relinquish the positions of both king and prime minister.

In current circumstances, Salman could become a pawn for both MbS and his royal detractors, as showing respect to the monarch might be interpreted as implying disrespect for MbS. When the king returned in February from his disastrous appearance at the Arab League–EU summit in Egypt, it was reported that MbS did not meet him. But arguably more significant, no fewer than forty-eight other princes were there, along with another fifteen who accompanied the king on his aircraft. The official Saudi Press Agency named all of them, although providing such detail is unusual.

U.S. Policy

Washington wants a stable Saudi Arabia that also participates responsibly in the world oil market. In recent years, the kingdom's hardline Islam is being moderated, a trend that the United States encourages. Because of Saudi Arabia's wealth, size, and location, Washington also wants working ties across many issues, including energy, Islam, the Arab world, Arab-Israeli peace, and the Iranian threat.

MbS is seen as emphasizing nationalism rather than Wahhabism, although he is careful to continue nurturing his Islamic credentials. He has, however, been credited with curbing Islamic extremism and moderating social policy, on which allowing women to drive has been the most obvious headline. He also appears to have different views from others toward Israel, not only accepting its place in the Middle East but also seeing it as a natural partner.

The reality of the credit MbS deserves is more nuanced. Even in 2013, King Abdullah was reducing the powers of the religious police in response to rising pressure by young people. Abdullah also recognized publicly as early as 2005 that women would eventually drive—his daughter Adila openly advocated it. On Israel, also from the start of Abdullah's reign, security and intelligence cooperation was increasing as a consequence of the perceived threat of a nuclear-armed Iran.[6]

What MbS has done is break the logjam on reforms, previously held back by concern about opposition from the religious establishment and princely rivalries. Although the social advances of the last two years seem to enjoy much popularity, especially among young people, one cost has been a complete clampdown on critics and political activism.

Yet given the momentum of the reforms, the chances of them being reversed, even if MbS were not to become king, seem slight—although they could well be slowed down. The pace of economic change is already being held back by insufficient funds to match the kingdom's announced ambitions as well as the strain on administrative resources. Some Saudis speak, without apparent irony given current repression, of "the dark ages returning" if someone other than MbS assumes power. This appears to be code for vengeful princes partnering with a reempowered clerical leadership. In truth, the non-MbS options for the future may well be wider.

The United States has in the past, at least publicly, avoided becoming involved in Saudi succession issues. Nevertheless, it probably has had and should have preferences. There is little doubt that Washington did not want either Crown Prince Sultan or Crown Prince Nayef to become king. Both men were regarded as unimaginative hardliners who were too close to Islamic extremists. In particular, both were involved in paying protection money to Osama bin Laden in the years before the 9/11 attacks so that al-Qaeda would not target the kingdom.[7]

Without MbS, Saudi policy on Yemen, and on Qatar, could change. It was notable that Prince Mitab bin Abdullah was reluctant to commit National Guard forces in Yemen during the early months of the war. And onetime crown prince MbN was said to have a good working relationship with Emir Tamim of Qatar. So Riyadh might become more amenable to a Yemeni government including Houthis, and perhaps reopen its border with Qatar. Either or both of these actions would likely damage Saudi relations with the United Arab Emirates, where MbS has been in lockstep with Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, his

counterpart as crown prince in Abu Dhabi. Additionally, while the White House has taken a highly forgiving approach to MbS over the Khashoggi affair, Congress has decided that the crown prince is to blame and should suffer consequences. So far, there is little indication that MbS judges this condemnation as important. It may, however, help explain his apparent foreign policy tilt toward Russia and China, both of which carefully limit adverse comments about allies.

In the current circumstances, the United States should work closely with MbS in order to limit the damage from his excesses, while also maintaining links across the spectrum of the royal family. His succession may appear inevitable, but circumstances could change. Such a bridging policy—allowing for at least the possibility of a non-MbS future—may be inimical to MbS but would be very much in the interests of the United States.

Notes

1. Adapted from Simon Henderson, *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 1995), *https://washin.st/2VqJVos*. The list was given to the author by the late Sir James Craig, a former British ambassador to the kingdom.
2. Simon Henderson, "Saudi Palace Politics Gain Pace" Policy Alert (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 20, 2017), *https://washin.st/2OU7a83*.
3. See the royal order issued June 21, 2017: "...after the sons of the founder King [Ibn Saud] shall not be a King and a Crown Prince of one branch of the offspring of the founder King," *http://bit.ly/2UeBc7y*. Also see Simon Henderson, "Saudi Royal Transition: Why, What, and When?" PolicyWatch 2874 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Oct. 18, 2017), *https://washin.st/2WU5bDH*.
4. For background, see Ben Hubbard, Mark Mazzetti, and Eric Schmitt, "Saudi King's Son Plotted Effort to Oust His Rival," *New York Times*, July 18, 2017, *https://nyti.ms/2IlL9P6*.
5. Simon Henderson, "Meet the Next Generation of Saudi Rulers," *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 10, 2017, *http://bit.ly/2K8BxJf*.
6. See Louise Lief, "With Youth Pounding at Kingdom's Gates, Saudi Arabia Begins Religious Police Reform," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 23, 2013, *http://bit.ly/2UhYlLm*; and Simon Henderson, "Is Saudi Arabia Really Changing?" *Atlantic*, Sept. 27, 2017, *http://bit.ly/2KbHe9k*.
7. See Simon Henderson, "The Saudi Way," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 12, 2002, *https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB102910989960335035*; and Simon Henderson, "Saudi Brezhnevs," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 3, 2005, *https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB112303561481603445*.

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