

Saudi Arabia:

Politics, Succession, and Opposition

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Brief Analysis

King Fahd is seventy-five years old and feeling the effects of his age. He has been suffering from memory loss and limited powers of concentration for several years, and certainly since his stroke last year. After that stroke, he temporarily appointed Crown Prince Abdullah regent, but resumed his duties earlier this year. The King can still function, based on reports of a December 1 meeting with U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry, but he was not able to attend a Gulf Arab Summit a few days later. Many at home and abroad anticipate Fahd's departure from the throne soon. For the U.S., the question of a smooth succession is particularly important considering that some leading Saudis have reportedly been pressuring the U.S. to attack Iran next year with Saudi Arabia or on its behalf as punishment for the al-Khobar bombing.

Historically, succession in Saudi Arabia has been a complicated and not extremely smooth phenomenon. The "rules" for succession since the death of the kingdom's founder, Abdul Aziz (also known as Ibn Saud), have been for brother to succeed brother (or half-brother) from among Abdul Aziz's sons. Currently, twenty-five of Abdul Aziz's forty-four sons remain alive. Considering a potential successor, there are several requisites for Saudi kings, two of which are most important. The first and most critical is seniority by age. Almost equally vital, however, is acceptability, by not only the royal family but also the wider population; there has traditionally been synergy between the public and the monarch, and the kingdom is aware of how crucial it is that the king resonate with the people. Less important qualifications but essential nonetheless are administrative experience, perception of wisdom, a common touch, and sound physical and mental health.

Currently, the senior members of the royal family by age are Crown Prince Abdullah (73), Bandar (73), Musaid (73), and Sultan (72). Abdullah, as head of the National Guard for many years, and Sultan, as minister of defense also for many years, have strong administrative backgrounds. On the other hand, Bandar (an uncle of Bandar bin Sultan, the ambassador in Washington) and Musaid do not have such qualifications and thus have weaker claims to the throne.

When Fahd goes, there is little doubt that Abdullah will be appointed successor assuming Abdullah does not die first. Sultan will be made crown prince and should eventually become king, but all the senior brothers are getting old and their reigns will probably be short: members of the family normally die in their early seventies. In all likelihood, the

generation of Abdul Aziz's sons, not his grandsons, will continue to rule for at least five to ten years. But the age issue is a potential problem for the Saudi kingdom as it is unclear at this time how the grandson generation will factor into future succession. One should not necessarily anticipate a crisis. The Saudis' ability to find and implement creative solutions to complicated situations solutions Westerners might not expect or comprehend, but that are perfectly acceptable to them should not be discounted.

JOSHUA TEITELBAUM

One cannot overestimate the importance of Islam in Saudi Arabia. The very legitimacy of the Saudi regime is rooted in Islam and contingent on the consent of the ulama, or Islamic religious clerics. In the 1920s, the Al-Saud family was branded as heterodox for threatening the Hashemite orthodox sharifs of Hijaz, and the Al-Saud have worked tirelessly (and quite successfully) to overcome that stigma ever since. Most of the Muslim world now considers the Saudi kingdom to be the paradigm of orthodox Islam. Annually during the Haj, the kingdom brandishes its role as protector of Islam, and throughout the year it vigorously and violently represses any opposition to this claim. Nevertheless, opposition in Saudi Arabia has been increasing from both Shi`i and Sunni communities since the Persian Gulf War. Shiites in Saudi Arabia, however, comprise only 12 percent of the population and practice what is generally perceived as a "reprehensible," schismatic form of Islam; therefore, they do not pose a credible threat to the Saudi kingdom, merely a challenge. On the other hand, the Sunni opposition is a real danger: the very existence of the Sunni opposition calls into question the kingdom's claim to being the legitimate guardian of Islam. This poses an existential threat to the essence of the Saudi legitimacy to rule. In that context, Saudis are more comfortable blaming the recent al-Khobar bombing on the Shiites rather than the Sunnis (though they have yet to fully verify this claim for the U.S.).

Sunni opposition comes from three major areas:

- The ulama-- Traditionally, the ulama have muted their critique of the Saudi government and issued the fatwas, religious rulings, that give Islamic approval for Saudi government activity (such as the regime's welcoming of foreign troops on Saudi soil during the Gulf War). Since the Gulf war, however, some ulama have become more vocal in their criticism of aspects of Saudi rule. This radical group, the new guard, is led by Salman al-Awda and Safr al-Hawali, both in jail for their involvement. The group has sponsored petitions and student protests that publicly criticize the kingdom for corruption, immorality, and connections to the U.S. The more traditional old guard, or establishment ulama, have been less vocal and more subtle in their critique, but they too are beginning to join a chorus of criticism of Saudi rule.
- Regions-- Saudi Arabia is a recent state, only in place since the 1930s. Consequently, tension between different regions of the Arabian peninsula that pre-dates the Saudi state undermines the current stability of the kingdom e.g., Hijazi resentment of the Najdis for moving business and government offices to Riyadh.
- Tribes--In spite of modernization and urbanization in Saudi Arabia, tribal identification remains a strong and important form of social identification, and thus division. This too creates friction. For example, many tribes feel slighted and abused by the Al-Saud who they perceive as being from inferior stock.

The threats to the regime in Saudi Arabia are real. More cooperation is needed among foreigners to understand these challenges, demanding an appreciation of not only the statements of the Saudi government but also those of the opposition, the ulama, the army and National Guard, students, and others. Observers should always question the loyalty of members of various armed forces and be aware of the extent to which radical fundamentalists have infiltrated their ranks. Another potentially dangerous mix for which the West should also be on alert: an alliance between the Islamic opposition and a potential royal successor.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Greg Saiontz.

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