

Meet the Next Generation of Saudi Rulers

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Muhammad bin Salman knows he can't rule alone -- which is why he's been quietly cultivating a group of young princes to serve his agenda.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman appears to be shredding our understanding about how Saudi Arabia is ruled. Seeking to consolidate his power, he threw caution and consensus-building -- the traditional techniques of Saudi leadership -- out the window months ago, proceeding instead with almost reckless speed and an apparent disregard for winning the support of his uncles and numerous cousins. The arrests last weekend of a reported 11 princes on charges of corruption suggest the royal family, the House of Saud, is no longer above the law.

The commentary over Mohammed bin Salman's recent moves has been divided between predictions that he is leading the country toward dictatorship or toward family revolt. But a careful examination of Mohammed bin Salman's actions and statements over the last year suggests that he is more calculating than impetuous. The Saudi attorney general said this week that the corruption investigations had been going on for three years, while Mohammed bin Salman mentioned the wide-ranging crackdown on corruption in a May interview. "I assure you that any person involved in a corruption case, whether minister, prince, or whatever, will not escape," he said.

Meanwhile, since April, Mohammed bin Salman, now 32, has been quietly orchestrating the appointments of a range of young princes in their late twenties or thirties to positions of power. They will likely be crucial to the success of his remodeling of the kingdom and could emerge as arbiters of power for decades to come. They are all either the grandsons or great-grandsons of the kingdom's founder, Ibn Saud, who died in 1953. Mohammed bin Salman is entirely prudent in promoting these younger cousins, appealing to their ambition and vanity, and securing their loyalty. It is a good way of internalizing any competition between family lines -- Ibn Saud had more than 40 sons, and the number of grandsons is in the hundreds. Mohammed bin Salman's actions have so far forestalled a collective family revolt, proving once again the utility of that old adage: divide and conquer.

As in all monarchies, bloodline is often more important than competence for prospective leaders in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Salman probably wants to promote talent -- but will also be paying attention to how to deflect resentment or the hint of opposition. Promoting sons can take some of the pain out of fathers being sidelined.

The House of Saud has witnessed difficult transitions before. What's different this time is that age is no longer equivalent to seniority and instead may have become a handicap. Comparative youth necessarily means a relative lack of experience, but that is a risk which Mohammed bin Salman seems to have decided he can handle.

The young up-and-coming princes to watch are (in alphabetical order):

- Abdulaziz bin Fahd is a great-grandson of Ibn Saud and deputy governor of the Jawf region, bordering Jordan, since June 2017. His father, a soldier, was made commander of Saudi ground forces in April 2017.
- Faisal bin Sattam was appointed ambassador to Italy in June 2017. He had shown early sympathy for the rise of Mohammed bin Salman: As a member of the Allegiance Council (the grouping of senior family members), he voted against Prince Muqrin becoming deputy crown prince in 2014, an early sign of belonging to the Salman camp. (Muqrin became crown prince on King Abdullah's death in January 2015 but was replaced by King Salman three months later. The late King Abdullah is reported to have schemed to replace Muqrin with Salman, thereby creating an opening as crown prince for the king's son Miteb, who was sacked as national guard minister last weekend and is one of those detained.)
- Abdulaziz bin Saud is the 30-year-old interior minister, appointed in June 2017. He replaced his full uncle and the then-crown prince, Muhammad bin Nayef, who was forced to resign. Abdulaziz bin Saud's father is governor of the oil-rich Eastern Province, where Saudi Shiites form a local majority. His new powers were curtailed within days of his appointment by the transfer of some of his responsibilities to a new state security organization. If he was upset, he didn't show it publicly.
- Abdulaziz bin Turki, 34, is deputy chairman of the General Sport Authority, appointed June 2017. His father, Turki bin Faisal, served as ambassador in Washington and London, as well as head of the kingdom's external intelligence body, the General Intelligence Presidency. Of late, Turki bin Faisal has engaged (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-conversation-on-security-and-peace-in-the-middle-east>) in public discussions with former Israeli officials.
- Ahmed bin Fahd, a great-grandson of Ibn Saud, was appointed deputy governor of the Eastern Province in April 2017. His father, who had been deputy governor of the Eastern Province from 1986 to 1993, died in 2001.
- Bandar bin Khalid, 52, was appointed advisor to the royal court in June 2017. His father is governor of Mecca Province.
- Khalid bin Bandar was appointed ambassador to Germany in June 2017. He is the Oxford-educated son of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former ambassador to the United States who cultivated ties with multiple American presidents.
- Khalid bin Salman, 29, was appointed as the Saudi ambassador to Washington this year. He is a former F-15 pilot and full brother of Mohammed bin Salman.
- Saud bin Khalid was appointed deputy governor of Medina in April 2017.
- Turki bin Muhammad, 38, was appointed advisor to the royal court in June 2017. His father, a son of the late King Fahd, was governor of the Eastern Province from 1985 to 2013.

A prince who just a week ago would have made this list was Mansour bin Muqrin, the deputy governor of Asir Province, who was killed in a helicopter crash on Nov. 5. He had served as deputy governor since 2013 and was made advisor to King Salman in April 2015, when his father was pushed from the position of crown prince. There is considerable speculation that he disliked Mohammed bin Salman, which is plausible because his father had been sidelined. An additional rumor is that his death was not accidental, for which, as yet, there is no evidence.

This list of princes is also notable for who is absent. It does not include any sons or grandsons of the late King Abdullah, and has only one grandson of King Fahd. Any direct relatives of Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, one of the so-called Sudairi Seven, are also absent. The omission is easily explicable: Ahmad is thought to have voted in the Allegiance Council against the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as crown prince in June this year.

Mohammed bin Salman clearly sees himself, and is seen by his father, as the next king of Saudi Arabia. The latest rumor is that the change may happen as soon as this weekend. Traditionally, the success of his transition would depend as much as anything on acceptance and support in the wider royal family, but Mohammed bin Salman's impatience and ambition suggest that won't be an option. Instead, his authority will rely on the backing of those in this list.

Another group that could prove crucial is princes in the military. These are harder to identify and are essentially in their positions to stop coups. A 1985 State Department [cable](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/85RIYADH4906_a.html) (https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/85RIYADH4906_a.html) released by WikiLeaks is rather dated but provides a good overview. "The mere presence of princes in the Armed Forces provides some degree of stability to the Al Saud regime," it concludes.

King Salman is thought to see Mohammed bin Salman as a modern-day Ibn Saud, a potentially great leader with huge ambition, and much more promising than any other, older potential contenders for the throne. But even Mohammed bin Salman appears to realize that, in order to transform his kingdom's economy and cope with the challenges of regional chaos, he must be the leader of a royal team.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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