

Saudi Royal Rivalries Test U.S. Relations

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Brief Analysis

Washington should back the winning side, represented by the new crown prince, but it must also be mindful of shifting family dynamics and tread carefully.

The appearance of a smooth switch in crown princes last week is at odds with reports that the former heir apparent is now under armed guard, confined to his palace in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah.

Reports regarding the fate of the former crown prince and interior minister Muhammad bin Nayef, known as MbN, including one in the *New York Times*, suggest not only policy differences but also concern about control of different branches of the Saudi armed forces.

Although the *Times* report was described as "baseless" by an unnamed senior Saudi official quoted by the Reuters news agency, MbN was widely judged to be a critic of policies promoted by his successor, defense minister and previously deputy crown prince Muhammad bin Salman, known as MbS and the favorite son of King Salman.

In particular, MbN had been against the style of Saudi intervention in the Yemen civil war in 2015, which has yet to produce the desired result despite the massive use of Saudi military force, particularly airpower. More recently, MbN apparently opposed the confrontation with Qatar that erupted in late May a few days after U.S. president Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh. Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt, have broken diplomatic relations with Qatar and instituted a land, sea, and air blockade. In the case of both Yemen and Qatar, MbS sees Iranian involvement that he wants to stop.

Although, as defense minister, MbS controls the Saudi army, air force, and navy, as well as the Royal Guard, substantial and well-armed forces come under both the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of the National Guard.

The Interior Ministry is now controlled by an inexperienced nephew of MbN, Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef, while the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), which also functions as a social support system for the tribes, remains under the leadership of Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, a son of the late King Abdullah and a close friend and political ally of MbN.

Despite the official denial, and the oaths of allegiance given to MbS last week by scores of princes, including MbN and Mitab bin Abdullah, the elevation of MbS to the role of crown prince and, given his father's infirmity, de facto king of Saudi Arabia will not be secure until he gains full control of SANG and the Interior Ministry. The abrupt timing and incompleteness of last week's transition could suggest that MbS had expected MbN to move against him.

The United States, which has always been concerned about Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter as well as the self-professed leader of the Islamic and Arab world, is presented with the challenge of whether to take sides in Saudi royal politics. The House of Saud is traditionally pro-American. And the trite answer confirms the dilemma -- Washington should back the winning side. But it should also be mindful of shifting family dynamics and tread carefully. Although MbS appears to be the face of the new Saudi Arabia, he may not yet have the royal family support that he seeks.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute, and coauthor of its 2017 Transition Paper [Rebuilding Alliances and Countering Threats in the Gulf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebuilding-alliances-and-counteracting-threats-in-the-gulf) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebuilding-alliances-and-counteracting-threats-in-the-gulf>). ❖

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