

Who Is Steering the House of Saud?

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Beset by ISIS attacks, a war in Yemen, and growing worries over Iranian influence, the new Saudi leadership appears adrift.

Saudi Arabia's local chapters of the Islamic State have turned out to be less than discriminating in their target selection. In May, two Shiite mosques in the Eastern Province were hit, killing 26 people. On August 6, the jihadi group blasted a Sunni mosque in the kingdom's southwest, close to the Yemen border; 15 people died, mostly Saudi security personnel. It was a reminder to Saudi royals that the Islamic State, while sharing their anti-Shiite instincts, also loathes the House of Saud and everything it stands for.

It's also a reminder that Saudi Arabia's ongoing clampdown on the Islamic State will continue. Last month, Saudi authorities announced the arrests of 431 suspected members of the group. Although the vast majority of the kingdom's roughly 27 million citizens probably prefer the leadership of King Salman to the chaos that has swept the Arab world since 2011, a not insignificant portion of Saudi youth appear inspired by visions of jihad constantly fed to them by social media and find that their youthful fervor is often not condemned by Saudi society.

The Saudi mosque bombings are just one sign of the mounting domestic and foreign crises facing the kingdom, many of which have a real or imagined link with Iran. Riyadh's most visible response has been to gather messages of support and condolence from allies -- while probably wondering which usual suspects to round up this time. Whatever the action is, it has to be seen as uniting rather than dividing the country. Achieving this balance will be particularly challenging if there are further incidents attributable to the Islamic State or any sign of retaliation from Saudi Arabia's Shiite population.

But it's not clear that the kingdom's leadership is up to the task -- regarding the spate of terrorist attacks on its soil or the other myriad problems it faces. The country's monarch can't even plan a vacation properly: Last week, King Salman apparently decided he disliked southern France, even though the public beach in view from his vacation

villa had been cleared of French sunbathers; he relocated with his more than 600-person entourage to his palace in Morocco. On the home front, meanwhile, the government is in the hands of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the king's favorite son and conduit for the monarch's policy preferences.

The relationship between Muhammad bin Nayef and Mohammed bin Salman has prompted much debate in foreign policy circles across the world. There is little doubt that the Saudi monarch wants Mohammed bin Salman to become king someday; the only question is whether Nayef will be allowed to squeeze in a reign between the two men. Many Saudi watchers currently believe King Salman will announce his retirement and declare that Mohammed bin Salman has replaced him -- the system of succession is in flux, and the only ironclad rule seems to be that the king's desires are paramount.

But there is conflicting information on whether a rivalry exists between the two princes. Some say that Muhammad bin Nayef -- or at least those courtiers who would lose out in this maneuver -- is plotting his own accession, which will sideline his younger cousin. Other reports from foreigners who have dealt with them, however, say that the two rivals can actually function well as a team.

The partnership will be increasingly tested in the coming months. The two men are charged with pushing Saudi Arabia's often fractious defense establishment to work toward a common goal: Muhammad bin Nayef is also minister of interior, responsible for domestic security, and Mohammed bin Salman is defense minister and therefore de facto commander of the Saudi army, air force, and navy. Traditionally, Saudi Arabia's Interior Ministry and military do not function well together. A third force is the Saudi Arabian National Guard, commanded by Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, whose ambitions to be king diminished when his father died six months ago and vanished completely when the king elevated Mohammed bin Salman to the deputy crown prince slot in April. Mitab, seen as an ally of Muhammad bin Nayef, is clinging onto his national guard role despite reports that Mohammed bin Salman wants to absorb the essentially tribal force into the Saudi land forces, making Mitab redundant.

The Yemen campaign is the most immediate problem facing the kingdom's new national security team. The Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes, which started in March, have failed to defeat the Houthi rebels and have turned the situation into a whack-a-mole game against former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's forces, wreaking massive collateral damage on innocent civilians. The government of exiled President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi has recently reestablished a toehold in the southern port city of Aden, from which a United Arab Emirates tank column advanced northwards earlier this week. But the Saleh-Houthi alliance remains intact, -- and the former leader gave a pugnacious interview to the new *Huffington Post* Arabic website this week, calling for Hadi to be put on trial in The Hague.

The role of the UAE, the only significant player to join the Saudi-led coalition, may have changed the course of the war. Operating out of a forward base in Eritrea, the preferred weapon of Emirati forces from the elite Presidential Guard has been suitcases of cash, as they attempt to bribe local tribes in southern Yemen to fight against the Houthis. Disquietingly, al Qaeda elements have also been recruited into the ranks of fighters.

"Adenis don't fight" was the scathing explanation given by one former senior Yemeni official as to why al Qaeda was needed to tip the balance in the fighting, causing the Houthis to retreat. Whether the UAE-led success will continue with its armored forces is debatable. Outside its elite units, the quality of the UAE military is questionable, despite its top-grade equipment.

Syria also remains a top Saudi concern, because of Riyadh's antipathy toward President Bashar al-Assad and the desire to deal his Iranian backers a strategic defeat. There has been a great deal of diplomatic activity on this front in recent days: Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir met in Doha this week; the Syrian foreign minister traveled to Oman; and there are rumors of a visit to

Riyadh by a Syrian intelligence chief.

In addition to its battles against foreign and domestic enemies, Saudi Arabia's rulers must contend with a financial crunch. The price of oil has dipped south of \$50 per barrel again, and Saudi Arabia has announced plans to borrow a whopping \$27 billion. Heavy expenditures in Yemen and handouts of an estimated \$32 billion to keep the population sweet when King Salman came to power have been a clear drain on the Saudi treasury.

Who is the key Saudi decision-maker on economic issues? That would be the 29-year old Mohammed bin Salman, in his role as chairman of the economic and development council. And once again, it points to the trouble facing the kingdom: The ledger of what needs to be done against what resources are available does not balance.

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