

Royal Roulette

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Jan 7, 2015

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Articles & Testimony

The West should be bracing for a stormy succession battle in the House of Saud.

The latest news from Saudi Arabia is that 90-year-old King Abdullah is, in the words of the crown prince, "recovering from [his] illness." That could be about right: The king went into a hospital in Riyadh on Dec. 31 and it takes about a week for antibiotics -- the standard way to treat pneumonia, his declared ailment -- to take effect.

But this is hardly a time to relax. The kingdom is a key member of the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State, whose fighters are testing its defenses, as a Jan. 5 attack along the Saudi-Iraqi border, which killed three Saudi border guards, showed. Also, Saudi Arabia should be a key player in the collapsing oil market, but is currently a powerless one, unable to stop the plunging price of oil but consoling itself that U.S. shale producers, as well as Russia and Iran, are probably finding the process even more painful.

Even if Abdullah suffers no health setbacks, the king is probably going to be out of the picture for a few weeks, dealing with the aftereffects of pneumonia. That is a big enough challenge. Until now he has been the top decision-maker, playing a personal role in sorting out the diplomatic squabble with neighboring Qatar, holding a summit with Jordan's King Abdullah, and replacing six ministers in a cabinet reshuffle last month.

Will Abdullah allow Crown Prince Salman (age 78) to take over that role in his absence? Probably not. There are questions about whether Salman, despite his frenetic schedule of meetings and public events, is capable. As former CIA analyst Bruce Riedel wrote almost two years ago, the crown prince "has been reported to be increasingly ill...and often not up to the job." A BBC analysis also noted unconfirmed reports that Salman "suffers health problems."

A key question is the extent to which Abdullah will have a role in the palace politics over his successor, which are gathering pace. The prevailing view of commentators writing about the kingdom has been that, this time around, succession to the Saudi throne should be "smooth." The caveats are about the future -- concerns about the time after next that the desert kingdom has to choose a leader, rather than about how it will choose Abdullah's successor.

It's high time that conventional wisdom came under greater scrutiny. In fact, Saudi Arabia's coming transition is unlikely to be smooth -- although this is certainly the way the House of Saud will want it to appear.

The kingdom's leadership is arguably actually at a crossroads, with two royal factions vying for preeminence. The outcome could produce a whole range of new faces in positions of power in Riyadh. This could emerge as a problem for Washington, as experienced hands could be replaced with merely ambitious ones. In these circumstances, King Abdullah's likely legacy of a slightly cranky approach to progress -- allowing for some marginalization of the more obscurantist clerics but always retaining a foot on the proverbial brake -- could become a distant memory.

To understand why the coming succession battle will be so thorny, it's important to understand the succession system that has operated in Saudi Arabia since its founding. All the main characters -- King Abdullah himself, as well as Crown Prince Salman and Deputy Crown Prince Muqrin -- are sons of the kingdom's founder, King Abdulaziz, also known as Ibn Saud. When he died in 1953, Ibn Saud left a system in which the throne passed from son to younger son, rather than from father to son. All but a few of the original 35 sons of Ibn Saud who were still alive in 1953 have since died. Of those remaining -- other than Abdullah himself, Salman, and Muqrin -- all have been passed over for the throne. At 71 years old, Muqrin, the son of a Yemeni slave girl, is the youngest surviving son.

In essence, the struggle pits the Sudairis, the largest single group of full brothers among Ibn Saud's sons, against the rest. Originally seven strong, the Sudairis all were born to the same mother, who came from the Sudairi tribe -- hence their moniker, "the Sudairi Seven." The group included some of Ibn Saud's most ambitious sons, and has dominated the House of Saud since the 1960s. King Fahd (died 2005), Crown Prince Sultan (died 2011), and Crown Prince Nayef (died 2012) were Sudairis, and older brothers of Crown Prince Salman. The remaining brothers are former Vice Minister of Defense Prince Abdulrahman, black sheep Prince Turki, and former Vice Minister of Interior Prince Ahmed.

The rise to prominence of King Abdullah -- who was younger than Fahd, whom he succeeded, but older than Sultan -- was achieved despite the best efforts of the Sudairis to thwart him. But since becoming king in 2005, Abdullah has had to accept three Sudairis as his crown prince: Sultan, then Nayef, and now Salman. With no full brothers of his own, he made alliances with other non-Sudairi princes to cement his authority. And crucially, he was also commander of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, the kingdom's largest fighting force.

From a Western perspective, the way forward is for Abdullah to abdicate, Salman to be sidelined (there is a mechanism to declare the king or crown prince medically unfit), and for Muqrin to become king. From a Saudi point of view, however, this wouldn't work. Within the royal family, there is tremendous respect for ancestry, history, and the orderly transfer of power. Even though Salman might not be up to the job, it's politically very hard for Saudi royals to push him aside: The princes hate any suggestion of dissension, which would then be visible to the wider world. The House of Saud was enormously embarrassed in the 1960s when Ibn Saud's successor, King Saud, had to be pushed aside for demonstrable incompetence. Mere fecklessness is easier to paper over.

So, given Abdullah's incapacity, Salman's continuing ambition (or what instead may be his sons' lust for power), and Muqrin's apparent reluctance to raise his own profile to project leadership potential, it is easy to understand that many Saudis seem to think that the accession of Salman is inevitable. This logic would suggest that -- again, not wanting to rock the boat too much -- Salman would anoint Muqrin as his own crown prince.

But that's not necessarily how Salman's accession to the throne would play out. As king, he would be entitled to appoint his own crown prince. Yes, Abdullah created the job description of "deputy crown prince" and put Muqrin in the role -- but that doesn't guarantee Muqrin would be promoted. Abdullah's attempt to secure Muqrin an advance oath of allegiance from other senior princes was not unanimous. Salman could reverse Abdullah's plans once he becomes king, perhaps appointing his previously passed-over full brother, Ahmed, as crown prince. However, that

concentration of power may be more than the non-Sudairi princes would tolerate.

This still leaves open the question of where the throne goes after Muqrin: Once all of Ibn Saud's sons are dead or incapacitated, which grandson of Ibn Saud will inherit the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques? And given Saudi Arabia's central role in the current challenges of the Middle East, is it enough that the succession be smooth -- or should Washington and other Western capitals encourage the House of Saud to allow the prince with the greatest experience and leadership qualities to emerge on top?

There is at least one argument that should trump the institutional conservatism in the palaces of Riyadh: Given the regional threats in the Middle East, making a muddled decision on a leader now could threaten the future of the royal house itself.

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

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