

Saudi Succession Change Risks Royal Family Squabble

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Brief Analysis

King Abdullah's appointment of Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, his half-brother, as deputy crown prince could marginalize Crown Prince Salman.

Succession in Saudi Arabia is a curious mixture of precedence and edict. In recent years, King Abdullah has tried to further systematize the process, most notably with the establishment of an "Allegiance Council" in 2006 made up of senior princes. But a royal decree issued earlier today essentially reduces the council's role. Instead it "mandates" that the royal family pledge allegiance to Muqrin as crown prince if that position becomes vacant, or as king if the positions of king and crown prince become vacant at the same time.

The announcement partially clarifies the uncertainty that has surrounded Prince Muqrin since he was appointed second deputy prime minister in February 2013. In the past, that position has been seen as "crown prince in waiting," though officially it only enables the holder to chair the weekly Council of Ministers meeting if the king (who is also the prime minister) or crown prince (who doubles as deputy prime minister) are abroad or otherwise unavailable.

Age seventy-one this year, Muqrin is the youngest surviving son of the late King Abdulaziz, a.k.a. Ibn Saud, the kingdom's founder. Since his death in 1953, the throne has passed from brother to younger brother with only a few omissions among Ibn Saud's more than forty sons, of which only fifteen are still alive. Most are sick and/or feeble. King Abdullah (age 90) can no longer walk unaided but remains compos mentis. Crown Prince Salman (77) has apparently had trouble focusing mentally of late, and doubts are often expressed about his capacity to become king. His recent trip to Japan was mainly for medical reasons.

But Muqrin's elevation challenges accepted understandings of how princes can qualify to be king because he is one of several of Ibn Saud's sons without Saudi tribal lineage. His mother, referred to in history books as "Baraka the Yemeni" was either a concubine or favored slave girl, a domestic arrangement that allowed Ibn Saud to have more than the four concurrent wives to which he was limited by Islamic law.

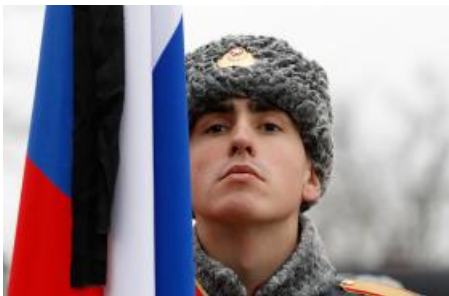
It would be surprising if Muqrin was not challenged on this point by royal family rivals with better pedigrees, though such disagreement might not be publicly visible. Keeping up appearances is important to Saudi royals. Crown Prince Salman recently completed a hectic series of official visits to Pakistan, Japan, India, the Maldives, and China, then chaired the Council of Ministers meeting the day after he returned. Given concerns about his health, the most likely explanation for his busy schedule is that his own sons -- along with his remaining full brothers in the so-called "Sudairi Seven" power clique -- are pushing him to retain the appearance of being the next king. Muqrin's appointment effectively casts doubt over the future political and financial prospects of Salman and these relatives.

A possible next move in this game of royal family chess is for King Abdullah to have a team of doctors declare Salman medically incompetent, allowing for Muqrin's early elevation to the heir apparent slot. Genes aside, Muqrin's professional credentials compare well with others. Trained as an F-15 pilot, he served as head of intelligence from 2005 to 2012 and as a provincial governor before that. He also has a reputation for being a nice man and a safe pair of hands, diplomatically speaking.

At the moment, it is difficult to see him as the leader of a kingdom that regards itself as the head of the Islamic, Arab, and energy worlds. (It is also challenging to identify any other immediate contender.) Yet today's announcement guarantees Muqrin a place in tomorrow's talks between King Abdullah and President Obama -- an occasion that will solidify his appointment without dampening speculation on when and how the kingdom's next big transition will occur.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. His publications include the 2009 Institute study [After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/after-king-abdullah-succession-in-saudi-arabia) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/after-king-abdullah-succession-in-saudi-arabia>). ❖

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