The Man Who Would Be King

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Simon Henderson (/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Articles & Testimony

Saudi Arabia's ruling clique is dying off, and it may be up to the new defense minister to guide the kingdom through a turbulent Middle East.

The senior members of the Saudi royal family are looking increasingly frail, and the buzz in the Gulf is that there will be not just one, but two, changes in the kingdom's leadership during the course of the next year. Although there is no fixed succession plan if that comes to pass, the newly minted defense minister, Prince Salman, looks well placed to ascend to the throne.

The evidence suggests that Saudi Arabia's current ruling clique is on its last legs. This week, the 89-year-old King Abdullah presided over the usual meeting of the council of ministers from the vantage point of his own palace in Riyadh rather than travelling to the council building. Propped up in his chair, a cushion supporting his back, he looked as uncomfortable personally as he probably was politically with the state of the Arab world. It grieves him that Syria, a country with which he has family ties, is in such bloody turmoil, and it infuriates him that Washington does not share his view of the danger of Iran.

Within a day or so, the Saudi heir to the throne, the 79-year-old Crown Prince Nayef, is due to return home after more than a month away from the kingdom. He initially went to Morocco on "vacation," but within a week traveled to Cleveland, Ohio, for "routine" medical tests, before flying to Algeria. Such an itinerary -- and an absence of photographs of him since leaving Cleveland -- has raised speculation that he is unwell. In recent months, he has added a stick to his wardrobe and regained a steroidal puffiness, renewing speculation that cancer, probably leukemia, has returned after an apparent respite of several years.

A leadership role is increasingly being taken by Prince Salman, 76 years old, who was promoted to minister of defense last November after the death of then Crown Prince Sultan. The pages of Saudi newspapers have been filled in recent weeks by reports and photos of Salman visiting military units across the country. And last week, Salman visited London in a major demonstration of Riyadh's close military-supply relationship with Britain, its most

significant link after its longtime alliance with the United States. Bypassing the U.S. capital may conveniently have served to emphasize that the White House's apparent obsession with political change in the Middle East is not appreciated in Riyadh.

As a former long-serving governor of the kingdom's giant Riyadh province, Salman is a known quantity to visiting international dignitaries. However, his familiarity with the world does not make him particularly worldly. Soon after the terror attacks on New York and Washington of September 2001, he told newly arrived U.S. ambassador Robert Jordan that the 9/11 attacks had been a "Zionist plot." The ambassador had to request that CIA briefers visit the kingdom to convince royals, including then Crown Prince Abdullah and Prince Nayef, otherwise (Jordan related this story during a **2009 Washington Institute Policy Forum (/policy-analysis/view/who-will-be-the-next-king-of-saudi-arabia...-and-does-it-matter)**).

Even if Salman soon becomes king, he is no spring chicken himself -- there is no certainty that he will reign for long. Salman himself has had at least one stroke -- photographs suggest that despite physiotherapy his left arm does not work as well as his right. And his line of the family has a history of health problems: his two oldest sons, Fahd and Ahmad, have already died as a result of heart problems. Saudi Arabia -- the world's largest oil exporter and a leader in the Islamic world and Arab world -- may still be a long way from political stability.

As nature abhors a vacuum, so does the Saudi royal family. But who will emerge as next in line after Salman is even murkier. There are another half-dozen sons of the kingdom's founder, King Abdul Aziz, a.k.a. Ibn Saud, but no obvious contender. Prince Muqrin, the youngest son and the current intelligence chief, is one candidate, though his lack of good maternal pedigree (she was a Yemeni concubine) is probably a major handicap.

In the interim, it is easy to predict an increasingly open rivalry between the sons of Abdullah, Nayef, and Salman. The king's most prominent but not eldest son, Mitab, is the head of the national guard; a younger son, Abdul Aziz, is deputy minister of foreign affairs. Crown Prince Nayef's son Mohammed is the assistant minister of the interior, and well respected for his counterterrorism prowess. Salman's son, Abdul Aziz, is assistant minister of oil.

The machinery of government, however, remains largely in the hands of long-serving functionaries. During an interregnum, they can be relied on to at least -- to choose an appropriate metaphor -- keep the oil tanker on course. At King Abdullah's side is Khalid al-Tuwaijri, the son of the late Abdul Aziz al-Tuwaijri, one of Abdullah's closest associates. Each day, Khalid -- dubbed the "uncrowned king" -- receives or discerns instructions from his monarch. Another such figure is Musaid al-Aiban, a minister of state with a Harvard doctorate who now looks after the Yemen portfolio and who accompanied Salman to London.

The advanced age of Saudi Arabia's ruling elite virtually ensures that the kingdom will undergo a series of leadership changes in the coming years, throwing an already troubled region into further turmoil. With Syria burning, Yemen in chaos, and Iran possibly inflamed by sanctions and diplomatic pressures, foreign capitals view Saudi Arabia's immediate future with unsurprising nervousness.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the ***Gulf and Energy Policy Program (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/gulf-and-energy-policy-program/)*** *at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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