

## Saudi Arabia's Musk Revolution

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**Although few serious analysts of Saudi Arabia believe that politics in the kingdom could play out as dramatically as recent events in North Africa, it remains to be seen whether the Saudi people will continue to quietly accept the royal family's succession chess game.**

"The king is dead, long live the king" is a call which, in its Arabic form, is sure to be heard before too long in Saudi Arabia. In the latest chapter of the saga of the House of Saud, the ailing and aged King Abdullah returned to the kingdom on Feb. 23 after a three-month absence, which included two back operations in New York City and a month's recuperation at his palace in Morocco.

It wasn't quite a triumphant return. Upon his arrival in Morocco, the king was brought down to earth in a wheelchair, carried from his aircraft in a scissor-lift disabled-passenger vehicle modeled on the design of a catering truck. A similar contraption was employed on his return home to Riyadh. The gerontocratic monarch is, obviously, on his last legs.

The real story of the king's return, however, was the gifts that he lavished upon his population. The king took the opportunity of his arrival to announce financial handouts to the Saudi population worth an astonishing \$36 billion, including, according to the *Financial Times*, a 15 percent salary raise for public employees, reprieves for imprisoned debtors, and financial aid for students and the unemployed. And all this on top of Saudi Arabia's planned budgeted expenditure of \$400 billion through the end of 2014 on improving education, infrastructure, and health care.

King Abdullah's largesse looks a lot like preventive medicine to ensure that Saudi Arabia does not catch the revolutionary disease spreading from Tunisia and Egypt across the Arab world. But few serious analysts of Saudi Arabia think that politics in the kingdom could play out as dramatically as the events in North Africa.

A tweet or two by a young, foreign-educated, Saudi woman resentful of her lack of rights does not make a Riyadh Spring. And it is unlikely that much will come of a Facebook campaign calling for a day of protests on March 11, or that an online petition signed by more than 100 Saudi academics and activists demanding a constitutional monarchy gains momentum. The kingdom is, in the judgment of many, an extraordinarily conservative place, where people know their place and do what their parents tell them. To the extent there is a national sport, it is either driving dangerously or lethargy.

But it appears that not even Saudi Arabia can escape the currents of unrest sweeping through the Arab world. And the royal family, through its mismanagement of the kingdom's public infrastructure, might have brought some of it on itself. This has been one of Saudi Arabia's wettest winters, bringing calamitous floods to the coastal city of Jeddah. During one stormy night, three months' worth of rain arrived in a few hours. At least 10 have died, and more are missing. It was during one of January's storms that the fleeing ex-President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia arrived with his entourage.

The sewage system of Jeddah is basically nonexistent; at best, it is inadequate. In many houses, the waste from the bathrooms flows into underground tanks that are emptied every few days by fleets of tanker trucks. The trucks used to drive into the hills to the east of the city and dump their cargo into the deceptively named Musk Lake. That was until 2009, when heavy rains raised concerns that the dam at the western edge of the lake would break -- evoking fears that a proverbial wave of fecal matter would sweep downhill several miles to the city below. Since 2009, Musk Lake has been partially drained and treatment plants set up at what is hoped is a safe distance further into the desert.

However, fears arose this winter that even the remodeled Musk Lake would once again pose an excremental threat to the city, and Jeddah's citizens protested vociferously. Prince Khalid al-Faisal, the regional governor who is rated as being a good candidate for the throne sometime in the future, visited the flooded areas and commiserated with those affected. Interior Minister Prince Nayef took a helicopter trip over the flooded areas, peering through the windows, Bush-after-Katrina-like, at the devastation below.

As the world's largest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia has huge earnings but, by virtue of its relatively large population, has a GDP per capita much lower than those of neighboring Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Even this wealth is badly distributed, and, in Jeddah, many still face real hardship.

King Abdullah's generosity to the people of Saudi Arabia was probably motivated by a desire to both ease the difficulties of the kingdom's own poor and reinforce the House of Saud's reputation during what promises to be a difficult transition period. The princes are going to need the support over the next few months.

In televised and well-photographed action in the Council of Ministers building over the last few months, a bizarre charade is being played out. Crown Prince Sultan, King Abdullah's designated successor, is chairing meetings of the Council of Ministers, as well as greeting visiting foreigners and Saudi dignitaries. Sultan, however, is reportedly suffering from Alzheimer's disease and, anecdotally, does not even recognize government ministers whom he has known for years. A WikiLeaks cable described Sultan as "for all intents and purposes incapacitated."

Keeping Sultan in the public eye appears to be an elaborate deception carried out by his younger full brothers or his sons, as part of a palace plot to ensure Sultan becomes king when Abdullah dies. This would allow him to choose the next crown prince -- either one of his own full brothers or one of his sons. Having been undermined by Sultan

and his close relatives for decades, King Abdullah has tried to blunt such a maneuver by setting up a so-called Allegiance Council, made up of his 30-plus half brothers or their senior sons, to choose a future crown prince. This wouldn't stop Sultan from becoming king, but it would widen the choice for crown prince beyond Sultan's closest kin.

However, the Allegiance Council could simply be voided by Sultan once he becomes king or by those pulling his puppet strings. So Abdullah's other blocking tactic is simply not to die anytime soon. If Sultan meets his maker before Abdullah, the main problem disappears -- though a new one would be created, as Abdullah and the wider Allegiance Council would still have to outmaneuver Sultan's surviving full brothers, who would continue to form the largest single voting bloc in the institution.

This, at least, is the chess game currently being played within the House of Saud on the question of succession. Whether the Saudi people will accept this quietly, given the winds of change running through the rest of the Arab world, is quite another question.

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