

Changing the Guard: Saudi Arabia's Geriatric Politics

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Nov 18, 2010

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Yesterday, November 17, in the middle of the Eid al-Adha holiday, the Saudi Press Agency announced that Prince Badr, the long-serving deputy commander of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), had asked to be relieved from that role due to ill health. Minutes later, the agency announced that Badr's request had been accepted and that King Abdullah's son, Mitab, had been named SANG commander as well as a minister of state and a member of the Council of Ministers. Unstated was that King Abdullah, who had served as SANG commander since 1962, had given up the position.

The announcements have added to speculation that rivalry between the king and various senior princes is peaking. It remains to be seen whether leadership change in the kingdom -- the world's largest oil exporter and home of the two holiest places in Islam -- will be carefully choreographed or lead to open squabbling.

Photo-Op Politics

An extraordinary sequence of royal news stories have emerged over the past few days, showing that either the senior princes are determined to keep up appearances of relative good health or, more likely, their sons are insisting on broad coverage to show that their fathers remain important players. Last week, the eighty-seven-year-old king disappeared from view, failing to chair the weekly council of ministers meeting. Four days later, on November 12, he was reported to be resting due to a herniated disc.

The next day, eighty-six-year-old Crown Prince Sultan, who has been suffering from cancer and is convalescing in Morocco, appeared in public as if to show he was ready to take over Abdullah's mantle. He was photographed signing an airport contract, even though his mental faculties are reportedly so poor that he is no longer able to function in the posts he still holds (deputy prime minister and minister of defense and aviation).

On November 16, the king -- whose own moments of lucidity are said to be declining as well -- appeared in public for a lunch with various princes and senior officials. Standing only briefly, he leaned heavily on a cane.

All of this has taken place against the background of the Hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. In Riyadh's view, ensuring the event's smooth operation is the royal family's preeminent responsibility. Given Abdullah's absence, the task of supervising this year's arrangements has fallen to seventy-seven-year-old Prince Nayef, the second deputy prime minister and interior minister, widely considered to be a future king.

Military Triad

For years, Abdullah, Sultan, and Nayef have led three distinct military bodies in the kingdom: respectively, the 100,000-strong SANG; the 75,000-strong army and 20,000-strong air force; and the 80,000-strong paramilitary and police units. SANG's principal role is seen as protecting the royal family from military coups; American advisors substantially built up and retrained the force during the 1970s following a 1969 plot involving air force officers. Although less well equipped than the army, SANG is regarded as more militarily competent. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the army dithered while SANG units took up blocking positions on the border, helping to deter Iraqi armor from advancing on Saudi oil fields.

Leadership of SANG, the Saudi military, and the Interior Ministry forces is jealously guarded by the rival senior princes, who regard these responsibilities as personal fiefdoms. As fathers have become older, they have passed down increasing responsibility to their sons. Prince Mitab was made deputy commander for executive affairs at SANG in 2009. Sultan's son Khaled has been assistant minister of defense and aviation since 2001. And Nayef's son Muhammad has been assistant interior minister for security affairs since 1999.

Succession Rivalry

Prince Mitab's appointment as SANG commander not only fulfills a long-held personal ambition, but will also likely prompt his cousin Khaled to take over the role of defense minister from his father, Sultan. Similarly, Prince Muhammad will no doubt yearn for the position of interior minister. None of them are considered immediate candidates for the throne, however. For at least the next few years, that role will likely remain reserved for sons of the kingdom's founder, Ibn Saud, who have ruled in declining order of age since his death in 1953. Apart from Abdullah and Sultan, another eighteen surviving sons remain in line, but many have poor health, no apparent competence, or little family support. Nayef and Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh province, seem like the only real candidates at present.

The main schism in the royal family remains the longstanding division between the so-called Sudairi sons of Ibn Saud (the largest group of full brothers, named after their mother's tribe) and their half-brothers. Sultan is the oldest surviving Sudairi; Nayef and Salman are among his full brothers.

For years, the Sudairis have plotted to undermine Abdullah. In 1982, when King Khaled died and was replaced by Fahd, himself a Sudairi, Fahd's brothers insisted that Abdullah give up command of SANG as the price for becoming crown prince. Backed by other half-brothers as well as the sons of the late King Faisal, Abdullah refused. His gesture this week of naming Mitab as SANG head effectively ensures that the force will remain independent rather than being absorbed into the main Saudi military, as the Sudairi princes have wanted for so long. SANG's domestic political influence is far wider than its 100,000 troops, at least a quarter of which are only part time. It also acts as a social welfare organization for the kingdom's Bedouin tribes, ensuring their loyalty to the House of Saud.

Challenges for the United States

Saudi Arabia's oil holdings and resultant wealth have made it an important member of the G-20. And on the ideological front, King Abdullah -- in the monarchy's traditional, self-styled role as "custodian of the two holy places" of Islam -- has been an important voice in depicting Muslim extremists as "deviants" rather than proper Muslims, per Saudi parlance. Encouraging Riyadh to maintain these positions has become an important policy objective for the Obama administration, even if it is still a work in progress: this week the State Department criticized the continued presence in Saudi textbooks of offensive references to other religions.

The advanced age and increasing ill health of the senior princes will likely enhance persistent tensions within the royal family. Washington is anxious to ensure that any transition is smooth, and that the new Saudi leadership continues its helpful policy stances, at least with regard to safeguarding global energy supplies and delegitimizing extremism.

An immediate concern for both Washington and Riyadh is facilitating progress on the recently announced \$60 billion U.S. arms package to Saudi Arabia, which includes top-range F-15s for the Saudi air force and, for the first time, helicopters for SANG. Progress on the latter deal will likely be an important responsibility for the newly appointed Prince Mitab. Although Washington also intends to sell 24 Apache Longbow attack helicopters to the Saudi army and 10 more to the elite Saudi Royal Guard, these orders are dwarfed by the proposed sale of 156 helicopters to SANG: 36 Apache Longbows, 72 Blackhawk transports, and 48 Little Bird-type attack and utility craft. Indeed, the SANG component of the arms package is collectively valued at \$29.6 billion, half the total.

The official U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency news release describing the deal confidently stated, "Saudi Arabia will have no difficulty absorbing these helicopters into its armed forces." Yet this notion -- as with hopes that the kingdom's approaching political transition will be smooth -- seems at best a testable proposition rather than a certainty.

Simon Henderson, the Baker fellow and director of the [Gulf and Energy Program \(/template102.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy%20Program&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at The Washington Institute, is author of [After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia \(/templateC04.php?CID=315\)](#). ❖

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