

## Saudi Arabia Changes Course, Slowly

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

On February 14, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced a range of new ministerial, legal, and bureaucratic appointments. Surprising in scope and timing, the changes include the appointment of the kingdom's first woman as a deputy minister and were made, according to Labor Minister Ghazi al-Ghusaibi, "to speed up implementation of new educational and judicial reforms." The realization of such reforms remains questionable given the traditionally glacial pace of administrative change in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, further advances could be blocked by more conservative and religious forces.

#### Abdullah's First Reshuffle as King

Arguably the most significant appointment is that of Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Muhammad -- who comes from a branch of the royal family with no direct claim to the throne -- as the new education minister. (The woman appointed, Nura al-Fayez, will be a deputy education minister, in charge of girls' affairs.) Prince Faisal is regarded as progressive, and he founded a think tank studying the reform of higher education. Until his appointment, he was a top leader in the Saudi foreign intelligence service and, before that, a senior officer in the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), the praetorian guard commanded by King Abdullah for more than forty years. But Prince Faisal's principal significance is that he is married to the king's daughter, Adila, giving his policy initiatives important backing. Princess Adila has strong views of her own, being one of the few Saudi princesses with a semipublic role and a known advocate of women's right to drive. (The kingdom is the only country in the world where women are not allowed to drive.)

Apart from Prince Faisal, other associates of King Abdullah also figure prominently in the changes. The new health minister is Abdullah al-Rabia, who has been in charge of health at the SANG but is better known as a surgeon who has separated several conjoined twins. Another new deputy minister of education is Faisal al-Muammar, who was secretary-general of the National Dialogue Center, the principal mechanism used by King Abdullah to allow public -- albeit tentative -- debate of contentious issues in the kingdom. The new head of the Saudi Human Rights Commission is Bandar al-Aiban, a former member of the consultative council (majles al-shura) and before that a SANG officer attached to the Saudi embassy in Washington.

#### Team Abdullah

King Abdullah, who turns eighty-six this year and is reportedly limited in his abilities, is probably best described as the sponsor rather than the architect of these changes. But he is allowing a group of close advisers to develop ideas and policies that are, in Saudi terms, pushing the envelope of political and social progress, even if by regional standards the measures seem minimal and overdue. Crucial advisers around the king include Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, Labor Minister al-Ghusaibi (a poet and writer on the side) and Khalid al-Tuwaijri, the secretary-general of the Allegiance Council, the so far untried mechanism announced in 2007 for confirming the appointment of future kings. Another is Saudi ambassador to the United States Adel al-Jubair, who seems to spend as much time with the king as he does in Washington.

#### Confronting the Islamic Clerics

As if appointing a woman to a ministerial position was not a sufficient affront to the conservative, misogynist Saudi clerical establishment, King Abdullah has also used his authority to change its leadership. Out goes hardliner Shaikh Saleh al-Luhaidan as head of the Supreme Council of Justice, who last year declared it was permissible to kill owners of satellite television stations that show "immoral" content. (His particular objection was to a popular Turkish soap opera; he later pointed out that there should be a judicial process before the death penalty was issued.) The head of the religious police, whose antics of imposing strict Islamic lifestyles and controlling contact between the sexes have been provoking increasing outrage in Saudi society, was also removed. There is also a new head of the Council of Senior Clerics, the body which confers Islamic legitimacy on the ruling House of Saud.

#### Challenges

The absence or postponement of expected changes in the past year had been attributed to caution or lack of energy on the part of King Abdullah. Saudi conventional wisdom holds that the ground must be prepared before any shift in direction or step forward be attempted. Saudi media reports say the changes have been welcomed, but it is unclear whether potential opposition was assuaged or merely outflanked. Even foreign media based in the kingdom is constrained: an international news agency correspondent had to recently leave Riyadh after reporting that Crown Prince Sultan had cancer.

One source of likely criticism will be from the kingdom's Islamic preachers and their foot soldiers, the religious police. The announcement of the changes on Valentine's Day was surely coincidental: the previous day the local Arab News daily had reported that the religious police had "intensified [their] vigilance over flower, chocolate, and gift shops to confiscate items related to . . . a holiday perceived by many to be both Western and immoral."

Previously, King Abdullah had been careful not to confront the Islamic clerics: In a May 2005 reshuffle, shortly before the death of the incapacitated King Fahd, Abdullah sacked a reformist education minister who had taken the description of Jews and Christians as being pigs and monkeys out of the eighth-grade curriculum. Abdullah replaced him with an Islamist who, in a 2002 book, had blamed "some mass media centers that are managed by Jews in the West" for reports linking terrorism and Islam.

An intriguing aspect of the changes will be the reaction from others in the royal family, particularly Crown Prince Sultan and the rest of his Sudairi subclan in the hierarchy. After medical treatment in New York City, Sultan is convalescing in Morocco. Despite his reported illness, he looked well enough in photos taken while meeting the crown prince of the United Arab Emirates a few days ago. It is not clear the extent to which Sultan, who is also the long-serving defense minister, was involved in changes announced in the military command structure that would normally be considered his purview.

#### U.S. Interests

The chief concern for Washington is that Saudi Arabia remains a helpful partner on a wide array of issues, including international energy and financial policy, Islamic militancy, the Middle East peace process, Iraq, Afghanistan, and relations with the Islamic world. (President Obama chose a Saudi-owned satellite television station, al-Arabiya, for his first interview aimed at the Arab and Muslim world.)

It is already clear that King Abdullah and his team have strong views about what the United States should do, particularly with regard to Israel and the Palestinians. It remains to be seen whether the king, who next week is due to give a major speech covering international, regional, and domestic issues, will still push his 2002 peace plan. After the recent Israeli military action in the Gaza Strip, he warned that the gesture would not remain on the table forever.

An even greater concern for Washington is that reforms being pushed by King Abdullah should not die with him. Although in apparent good health, he is already the eldest surviving son of the line of brothers who have ruled since the death of the founder of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz, in 1953. Given the kingdom's oil wealth and claim to Arab and Muslim leadership, these latest changes are not merely esoteric but of international importance.

An additional concern could be the ambitious nature of the reform. Near-insiders speculate that a decision allowing women to drive cannot be far off -- a decision that would infuriate religious conservatives. Equally contentious within the royal family would be the king's appointment of deputy ministers in such Sudairi strongholds as the defense and interior ministries.

Simon Henderson is Baker fellow and director of the [Gulf and Energy Policy program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchAreas\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchAreas) at the Washington Institute. ❖

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