

Policy Alert

The New 'King' of Saudi Arabia

[*Simon Henderson*](#)

June 21, 2017

Although pro-American, now-crown-prince Muhammad bin Salman has a firm view of Saudi Arabia's place in the world and his own role in securing it.

The latest Saudi transition had been predictable since soon after King Salman ascended the throne on the death of his older half-brother Abdullah in January 2015. Within three months, Salman had positioned Muhammad bin Salman, the eldest son of his third wife, as his intended eventual successor. The only question was when the transition would occur. It has now happened, although raising new questions: When will MbS, as he is known, become king in name and under what circumstances?

Those answers are hard to guess, but the king's now-dismissed predecessor, Muhammad bin Nayef, or MbN, was long perceived by many as a stopgap. Additionally, although an experienced minister of interior and the kingdom's counterterrorism chief, he was scarred by the 2009 experience of having a supposedly surrendering jihadist meet him wearing a rectal device that exploded.

King Salman's own health is also uncertain. At eighty-one, he walks with a cane and, when meeting foreign leaders, sits before a computer screen to remind him of his talking points. Once reputed to be the House of Saud's institutional memory, Salman now often displays a puzzled visage and has leaned increasingly on MbS for advice, apparently regarding him as almost a reincarnation of King Abdulaziz, known as Ibn Saud, Salman's father and the founder in 1932 of Saudi Arabia.

Unlike Salman's other sons, one of whom has a doctorate from Oxford, MbS was not sent abroad for education. At thirty-one, MbS wears sandals rather than the Gucci shoes favored by some of his cousins, and does not speak fluent English. He is said to allow his views to be challenged -- but does not change them. His greatest strength, or weakness, may be his ruthlessness. A widely believed anecdote is "the bullet story." As told (to the author) by one of the crown prince's cousins, after leaving university in Riyadh, MbS sought to establish himself in business. At one point, he needed a judge to sign off on a deal. When the judge refused, MbS removed a bullet from his pocket and told him he had to sign. The judge acquiesced but complained to then king Abdullah, who banned MbS from his court for several months.

This is the young man who is already the main contact between his country and the Trump White House, as well as the architect of the deadlocked war in Yemen, the Saudi lead in regaining two Red Sea islands from Egypt, and a hardliner in the current Gulf row with Qatar. He is said to be obsessed with the danger posed by Iran and favorable, one day, to open relations with Israel. On top of all this, he is the key arbiter of Saudi policy on oil, the price of which is, for Riyadh, worryingly low and trending lower, imperiling the groundbreaking IPO of Saudi Aramco.

Beyond the many roles already outlined, MbS is the lead figure on Vision 2030, the kingdom's ambitious plan to reform its economy and society. Such change needs to be encouraged, although the cultural barriers are great and reduced oil revenues mean funding is problematic.

The reported 31 to 3 votes in favor of MbS's new appointment by the Allegiance Council, a key royal family conclave, indicates wider al-Saud opposition to his new role may not be as great as might have been expected. Very few of his uncles remain on the council, and those still alive are mostly represented by their eldest sons. (In one case at least, the son voted yes whereas his father would have voted no.)

A series of other new appointments of individual princes also in their thirties suggests a complete generational makeover of a system previously dominated by royals marked by age and experience. Additionally, the new appointments acknowledge legacy bloodlines. The Ministry of Interior has been passed to a nephew of MbN. Another person promoted is the son of the former Saudi ambassador to Washington Prince Bandar bin Sultan -- Khaled bin Bandar is the new ambassador to Germany. (MbS's own younger brother is already the newly arrived incumbent in DC.) One further change to be expected involves the fate of Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, an MbN ally who remains head of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, a huge and capable paramilitary force that is U.S. equipped and trained.

MbS's appointment as crown prince should confirm the improved working relationship with Washington after the strains experienced during the Obama administration, chiefly over Iran and the nuclear deal. But sharp differences remain between the U.S. and Saudi positions on certain issues, including Yemen and -- apparently --

Qatar. Future ties will not necessarily be harmonious.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute, and coauthor of its 2017 Transition Paper ["Rebuilding Alliances and Countering Threats in the Gulf."](#)