

Articles & Op-Eds

To Stop Iran, Get a New Saudi King

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The Obama administration should intervene in Riyadh's succession crisis if it wants a reliable partner on Iran.

This piece is part of "[Obama and the Middle East: Act Two](#)," a series of policy proposals for the president's second term by Washington Institute fellows.

On December 25, while many Americans were eating turkey or Chinese meals and otherwise distracted from the rest of the world, leaders of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf met in Manama, the capital of the island state of Bahrain, for their annual summit.

The meeting was scarcely noticed by American newspapers and other media, which is a pity. The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are on the frontline of one of the likely top news stories of 2013 -- Iran's nuclear program. And Saudi Arabia, the GCC's largest, richest and dominant member, is facing a succession crisis.

If the United States and the rest of the international community are ever going to succeed in persuading Tehran to stick to peaceful use of nuclear technology, Saudi Arabia is likely a crucial player. But, right now, Riyadh is increasingly politically incapacitated. The world's largest oil exporter and the self-declared leader of the Islamic world is almost rudderless.

King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, who recently had back surgery, is, at 90 years old, increasingly frail. His half-brother and designated successor, Crown Prince Salman, 77 this year, stood in for him in Manama. But although Salman's visage appeared focused, his contribution was limited -- the future king's brain is befuddled by dementia.

Washington needs to overcome its perennial fear of upsetting the House of Saud and, breaking the habit of a lifetime of Foggy Bottom diplomacy, help a new leadership emerge in Riyadh. It doesn't need to be done with any public fanfare -- and is probably better if it isn't. Some of the pressure can come via the other GCC members.

Success could be -- and needs to be -- twofold: stopping a nuclear-armed Iran emerging, and getting the monarchies of the conservative Arab states of the Gulf on the right side of the turmoil in the Arab street.

Within the Saudi royal family, there are those apparently determined to keep Salman's candidacy in the fore. Photos published by the official Saudi Press Agency show that he meets frequently with Saudi officials and even diplomats and foreign visitors. Those in Salman's court rely on the discretion of those attending such occasions to preserve the myth that the crown prince can still function effectively.

On an even more public level, Salman's aides seem to be following a public relations plan depicting the crown prince, one of the wealthiest men in the world, as a man of the people. In a speech in Riyadh on December 20, Salman told the audience: "This country is yours...and I am one of you." Such a formulation is at best unusual in the only country in the world named after its ruling family, and sat ill alongside a news story the same day about the new double-decker A-380 private jet belonging to Salman's nephew, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, customized into a "flying palace" at the cost of half a billion dollars.

In an apparent moment of realization of the scale of the crisis that the kingdom is facing, last November, King Abdullah promoted a younger, second generation nephew, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, to the top position of interior minister. An able, hard-working prince, Muhammad, the son of the late Crown Prince Nayef, is seemingly being groomed as a future king. But his fast-track ascent has probably invoked the jealousy of many of his cousins, and his further elevation may be challenged by a dozen or so uncles, the remaining sons of Ibn Saud, the founder of the kingdom.

Washington's challenge is to secure the further promotion of Muhammad bin Nayef, while also helping to guide the kingdom between the Scylla and Charybdis of chaotic domestic politics and a repressive political atmosphere that in the past has produced political extremism like al-Qaeda.

Such a policy is against the (public) instincts of American diplomats. In an article in the January 10, 2013 edition of *The New York Review of Books*, the current U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, James B. Smith, is quoted as saying, "The three pillars [of the U.S.-Saudi relationship] are oil security, stability, and counterterrorism; pressure on human rights and political change were unproductive."

U.S. efforts in facilitating a transition in Riyadh can probably be helped by encouraging a debate among the GCC leaders about the need for these longstanding allies to respond positively to the pressures for change sweeping the Middle East. This could appeal to the instincts of these ruling families, which usually argue that their form of tribal consensus is better than the possible turmoil of Jeffersonian-type democracy. And some GCC members have already made substantial progress in encouraging the emergence of younger leaderships. Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi (and thereby the next leader of the UAE), is 51; the crown prince of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who represented his father in Manama, is only 32.

The final communique of the December 25 Manama summit was, in the circumstances, surprisingly outspoken in its criticism of Iranian interference in the internal affairs of GCC states and the threat of Tehran's nuclear program to the region's security and stability. But Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may well have perceived the generally geriatric lineup at the GCC summit as a weakness to exploit.

If the new Obama Administration is going to be successful on Iran, it needs to work with the House of Saud, as well as the ruling families in other GCC states, to make sure they are effective diplomatic partners in the process, rather than weak spots.

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