



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Saudi Succession and Stability

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The smooth succession of royals is crucial to the stability of the Saudi oil state. Ever since King Faysal, the Saudi monarchy has alternated branches of the family on the throne in order to maintain a degree of balance between competing royal family factions. This principle is likely to hold true today too, as the kingdom navigates its way from the rule of King Abdullah and the now-deceased Crown Prince Sultan to the rule of Crown Prince and next king, Nayif. The process of balancing and satisfying royal factions depends on patience and conservatism within royal circles. It also requires quiet in the streets of Riyadh and Jedda – and thus far, there are no signs of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ spreading to Saudi Arabia.

On October 22, 2011, the Saudi royal palace announced that the Crown Prince and Minister of Defense and Aviation, Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz, had passed away at a hospital in New York. Sultan had been sick for years, but his family faction, known as the Sudayri Seven, had hoped that he would live long enough to ensure their continued rule in the country. It appears that they may have succeeded.

### **Background: Saudi Succession**

With a few hiccups along the way, all 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Saudi successions have gone smoothly. Since the kingdom’s founder and first king, Abd al-Aziz, bore over 30 sons from an unknown number of wives, his descendants have coalesced into tribal-like factions within the royal family, known as the Al Saud.

They compete for influence, but value family unity over everything else. While not every faction can have a king, the Al Saud has been careful to distribute key ministries, control of the armed forces and provincial governorships among the important family factions.

It was King Faysal (d. 1975) who set the tone for balancing the succession among competing family factions. Contrary to what might have been expected, he did not appoint a son as crown prince, but rather his half brother, Prince Khalid. Khalid was a full brother to the older Prince Muhammad of the important Al Jiluwi clan (which had intermarried with the Al Saud). By appointing Khalid crown prince and deputy prime minister, Faysal appeased the Al Jiluwi. Prince Fahd (later king) was made second deputy prime minister and effectively crown prince in-waiting. He was one of the Sudayri Seven – an alliance of key princes who were brothers born to Abd al-Aziz's wife Hassa bint Ahmad Al Sudayri.

Soon after Khalid became king, it became clear that Fahd was the real power behind the throne. When Khalid died in 1982, Fahd, already crown prince, assumed the throne with little opposition. Fahd appointed Prince Abdullah (today king) as his crown prince, but not without opposition from his powerful full brothers amongst the Sudayri Seven. To mollify them, Prince Sultan was appointed to the crown prince in-waiting position, as second deputy prime minister. Faysal's example had been followed, and balance was maintained between the competing factions.

King Abdullah assumed the throne with Fahd's death in 2005. Prince Sultan was immediately confirmed as first deputy prime minister and crown prince. But only in 2009 did Abdullah appoint Minister of Interior and Sudayri Seven member Prince Nayif as second deputy prime minister (crown prince in-waiting). This extended wait may have reflected Abdullah's reluctance to give the post to a Sudayri instead of one of his sons. After all, if that post had gone to a son of his (he had no full brothers) this would have maintained Faysal's alternated kingship scheme to maintain Al Saud unity. Nayif's appointment appeared to have broken this scheme. But, given the real possibility that Sultan, 85-years-old and ailing at the time, could die as crown prince or within the first few years of his rule, a deal may have been struck between Abdullah and the Sudayris to make sure that they returned to the kingship.

### **Old and Infirm: Trouble at the Top**

The issue of succession has been worrying both Saudis and Western observers for several years as both are keen to see the crucial oil state remain stable. More

recently, this consternation has grown due to Abdullah's increasingly ailing health and a leaked medical report that puts him at 95 years old.

Regionally, the Arab uprisings have had an effect in Saudi Arabia, with the younger generation pushing for reforms, but the royal family has "bought time" with its judicious distribution of oil wealth to its subjects. Also, Saudi conservatism has prevented mass demonstrations as the thought of a Syria, Yemen, Bahrain or Egypt occurring in the kingdom is worrying to many.

But ever since Tunisian peddler Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in December 2010, one cannot divorce the succession issue from the issue of reform. The next king will be charged with dealing with challenges presented by the so-called Arab Spring.

### **Nayif: From Crown Prince to King**

As expected, Minister of Interior Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz was named crown prince and first deputy prime minister on October 27, two days after Prince Sultan was buried. Thus the Al Saud have kept the principle of balance, placing a Sudayri next in line for the throne after the present non-Sudayri King Abdullah. The conservative Prince Nayif, together with his powerful son, Prince Muhammad, has led a successful battle against al-Qaeda in the kingdom, using a variety of tribalistic carrot-and-stick tactics to put down an insurgency which began in 2003. While this achievement has not endeared him to Islamic radicals, it has earned him the support of the Wahhabi religious establishment, which he has enlisted in his campaign.

But when he becomes king, Nayif may disappoint those who seek a reforming leader. He has publicly opposed appointing female municipal council officials and even resisted elections for these councils. A 2009 American diplomatic cable published by Wikileaks stated that "Nayif is widely seen as a hard-line conservative who at best is lukewarm to King Abdullah's reform initiatives." It went on to say, however, that he had a pragmatic streak aimed at preserving Al Saud rule.

In the past Nayif has castigated the Muslim Brotherhood for their influence in Saudi Arabia, so he can be expected to look on with suspicion as the Brotherhood moves towards power in Egypt and perhaps in Syria and Tunisia. He can also be expected to continue his hard line stance against Iran, whom he has accused of fomenting trouble amongst the kingdom's minority Shiite population. With the annual pilgrimage to Mecca coming up this week, steps may be taken against

Iranian pilgrims (perhaps limiting their numbers and/or preventing them from carrying out demonstrations). Nayif's key role in quelling Saudi attempts in March to demonstrate against the regime should also be recalled.

Observers should bear in mind, though, that before King Abdullah's accession in 2005, he was also touted as conservative and anti-Western. Yet he has proven to be the biggest reformer since King Faysal, albeit on a Saudi scale. While it seems likely that Nayif will slow down the reform process even further – something that will certainly displease Westerners – he may still prove to be the right successor to the throne since he is backed by the religious establishment and may therefore be able to prod them to support gradual reforms, at the usual slow Saudi pace.

### **Who will be Nayif's Successor?**

To maintain the power balance across families, Nayif's successor – his crown prince -- should be neither his son nor one of the Sudayri Seven. This rules out his son Muhammad, who, as assistant minister of interior for security affairs, successfully countered the al-Qaeda insurgency and gained popularity after surviving an assassination attempt in August 2009. It also rules out Muhammad's older brother Saud, who, in July 2011, returned from his post as ambassador to Spain to serve as his father's advisor. Sultan's son Khalid would be out of the picture as well. And, applying similar principles, Nayif's full brother and Governor of Riyadh Province, Prince Salman, would also be crossed off the list.

In the name of Al Saud family harmony, it appears probable that Nayif will be persuaded to appoint a non-Sudayri. The two most prominent ones who come to mind are former King Faysal's son, Prince Khalid Al Faysal, and King Abdullah's son, Prince Mit'ib bin Abdullah.

The Al Faysal clan is considered to include some of the more worldly members of the Al Saud. Many have extensive experience abroad as well as in the more cosmopolitan region of the Hijaz, rather than the more traditional central area of Najd. Prince Khalid is a seasoned member of government, having ruled the Asir province for many years. From 2007, he has also governed the all-important province of Mecca. He is known to be intelligent, has a love of painting and poetry, and is a patron of the arts. He is also a personal friend of another crown prince, Charles of Wales. Khalid is widely believed to be respected in the family, appreciated for his combination of both modern and traditional sensibilities.

Prince Mit'ib's status comes from being his father's right-hand man in the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG). A graduate of Sandhurst, Britain's Royal Military Academy, he has been involved with SANG – which receives US training – for most of his adult life. With his father's help, he will preside over SANG's expansion, part of a massive deal with the Americans approved in November 2010. The new positions created by the deal and the prestige of owning so much modern weaponry will strengthen his position in the family and among the all-important tribes which make up SANG.

### **Moving Forward**

In the short term, there should be no cause for alarm. Nayif's appointment as the new crown prince will provide the requisite stability in the kingdom. The naming of the second deputy prime minister – the crown prince in-waiting – could be delayed indefinitely. Princes, in any case, understand the principle of cross-family balance, have patience, and are willing to delay gratification.

King Abdullah has committed himself to an excruciatingly slow process of reform, most recently allowing women to run for municipal council positions. Abdullah's moves are too slow for true reformers and too fast for the conservatives who form Nayif's base. But they reflect the balance needed for Saudi stability. Reformers and Western observers are undoubtedly dismayed that Nayif will succeed the aging Abdullah. These fears may be allayed if Abdullah's son Mit'ib or Khalid Al Faysal were made crown prince in-waiting.

The Arab spring will no doubt figure somewhere in the calculus of important royal family decision making when the crown prince in-waiting is chosen. He may be younger and more open to change. But above all, the Al Saud must ensure that the chosen prince will maintain the family's iron grip on power and preserve harmony within the family.

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