

## Associate Paper

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### **A Political Earthquake Hits Saudi Arabia?**

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#### **Key Points**

- The recent unexpected succession architecture decreed by King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud transfers the leadership of the country from the children of the country's founder to a new generation of grandchildren, in particular Muhammad bin Salman and Muhammad bin Nayef.
- The succession decrees, which consolidate power in the Sudayri branch of the family, signal a brewing power struggle within the royal family that is likely to continue.
- As the royal family focusses on potential internal dissension among the younger and more marginalised generation of royals, the Kingdom is simultaneously facing a myriad of domestic economic and social challenges, including growing poverty, high unemployment, inadequate education, human rights grievances and spreading radical ideology.
- Regionally, Saudi Arabia is experiencing an acute sense of insecurity because of the Islamic State, Iran and the instability within its neighbours, especially Yemen, Iraq and Syria.
- How the Kingdom deals with these domestic and regional challenges will have a far-reaching impact on Gulf stability and on Western interests and personnel in the wider region.

#### **Summary**

In the early morning of Wednesday, 29 April, Saudi King Salman issued 25 royal decrees announcing major succession and other personnel changes that created shockwaves in Saudi Arabia and across the Arab world. These decrees were announced less than 100 days since he issued his first appointments after ascending to the throne in January of this year.

Some commentators described the decrees as an “earthquake,” while others referred to them as a “soft coup.” Regardless of the description, King Salman has stirred the royal family’s political pot and ushered in a new line of succession.

### **Analysis**

The announcements applied to two key aspects of governance: the succession and the management of foreign policy. On the first, the King replaced his brother Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud with Muhammad bin Nayef, also known in the West as MBN, who three months ago was designated deputy crown prince. In addition, the king appointed his young son Muhammad, currently the defence minister, deputy crown prince, which puts him in line to the Saudi throne.

Another significant decree replaced veteran Foreign Minister Saud al-Faysal with Adel al-Jubayr, the current Saudi ambassador to the United States.

### ***What Does All This Mean?***

Regardless of whether these decrees are a political “earthquake” or just another demonstration of the opaque internal Saudi royal family dynamics, the new appointments come in the midst of unprecedented domestic and regional challenges facing Al Saud. Furthermore, the decrees denote several important “firsts” since the kingdom was created over 80 years ago.

For the first time, the swift change in the succession plan signals the end of the rule of the founder’s children and ushers in a new generation of grandchildren. The recently deposed crown prince, Muqrin, is the youngest living son of Abd al-Aziz’s 35 children and the last to have any hope of continuing the rule by the first generation. The current King Salman will be the last of the founder’s children to rule Saudi Arabia.

Also for the first time, the decree directed the succession to go specifically to two children of the Sudayri full brothers. The name refers to the tribe from which the founder’s most favoured wife hailed. The late King Abdullah was from a different mother and, hence, a half-brother. Furthermore, the succession designation focussed on the children of two specific brothers, Nayef, the former powerful minister of interior and crown prince, and Salman, the current king.

The removal of Saud al-Faysal as foreign minister again illustrates the marginalisation of the children of previous kings. Adel Jubayr also will be the first non-royal since the founding of the kingdom to assume the position of foreign minister.

Crown Prince MBN and Foreign Minister Jubayr are close friends of the United States. Despite the kingdom’s disagreement with Washington’s approach to Iran, these two leaders feel comfortable in their dealings with American officials. According to media reports, MBN has had a close and enduring relationship with US intelligence that goes back to the Bush Administration.

As I mentioned in a [previous posting](#), MBN's relatively pragmatic approach to the region and tough stand on terrorism could facilitate collaboration with the United States and with Iran, if a nuclear agreement is reached. He could also be well situated to play a pivotal role in helping to settle regional conflicts.

### ***Challenges and Choices***

Domestically, Saudi Arabia is facing high unemployment among its youth. Its economy is feeling the pinch of low oil prices. Education is another critical challenge.

The traditional Saudi education has not prepared the country's youth to compete for jobs in the modern global economy, leaving many of them frustrated, alienated, and without a sense of national identity or deep loyalty to the House of Al Saud. Some of the youth have turned to "jihad" and terrorism. Others who no longer benefit from the economic largesse and have no voice in the running of the country might begin to agitate for political reform.

The regime's expected ruthless response to domestic discontent could spark a "Saudi spring." If that happens, the "coming collapse of the Gulf monarchies," as Professor Christopher Davidson of Durham University has posited, would occur much sooner than experts would have predicted. Learning a lesson from the deep popular challenges facing present Arab dictatorships, family rule in the Gulf would be unable to buck the tide of pent-up popular frustrations and demands for genuine reform without bloodshed.

Although the Obama Administration might attempt to mollify Gulf Arab rulers with promised arms sales at the upcoming Camp David meeting, media reports indicate that American officials also would make it clear that such weapons should not be used against domestic protests. The president has already stated that the biggest challenge facing these regimes comes from within because of undemocratic rule and exclusion of their peoples from governance.

As the Saudi royal family grows in numbers, demands for state subsidies become more pressing. Corruption will become more acute, and the struggle for economic and political power among influential members of the second generation of royals would become more vicious and destructive.

The survival instinct that drove the founder and his children to rule by consensus will not necessarily filter down to the grandchildren, especially those who feel marginalised by the two rising stars, Muhammad bin Nayef and Muhammad bin Salman. The religious tribal alliances that Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud and his children forged in order to establish their authority across Arabia do not hold the same sway over the new generation of grandchildren. If deep jealousies and the struggle for influence and wealth break into open warfare within the family, they could spell disaster for the Saudi state. The demise of this absolute monarchy would no longer be unthinkable.

Although many within the ruling family view MBN with respect because of his counter-terrorism portfolio, they do not see Muhammad bin Salman in the same light. He is young, inexperienced, and ambitious, and derives unlimited power from his closeness to his father, the king.

According to media reports, domestic and international dissatisfaction with the mission and prosecution of the Yemen war is growing. The Houthis have not been defeated, Iran has not been weakened and Yemen is on the verge of collapse. Daily bombings and destruction have only exacerbated the human misery in Yemen, which, of course, started before the Saudi air campaign.

As a result of the unfathomable human tragedy unfolding in Yemen, international pressure will ultimately force Saudi Arabia to end its senseless war. When this happens, many Saudis, some members within the royal family, Yemenis, and other Arabs, will hold the king responsible for his poorly thought-out, counterproductive military adventure in Yemen.

Of course, King Salman's recent succession architecture might not hold. The liberal Bahraini on-line publication *Bahrain Mirror* has predicted that the new succession plan could evolve along three possible lines: King Salman changes his mind and removes MBN as Crown Prince and replaces him with son Muhammad; once king, MBN alters the succession plan from his cousin to his immediate family; or MBN and MBS form a symbiotic alliance to cement their hold on power at the expense of other Sudayri cousins.

### ***US Policy***

As they contemplate new policies towards the Gulf region, American policymakers should beware of the new complexities in Gulf and other Arab societies and the salient role of religious sectarianism in the Arab dictators' political calculus. Gulf rulers are determined to bring up their fear of Iran at their meeting with President Obama this month. Some of them, however, especially MBN of Saudi Arabia, surely understand Iran's historic role in the region and the logic behind Obama's diplomatic approach to Iran.

As MBN begins to comprehend the folly of his cousin's Yemen war, he would explore diplomatic avenues to bring the war to a halt, which require Iran's participation. MBN could also play a critical role in convincing MBS to swallow the "poison pill" and seek a negotiated settlement in Yemen, to paraphrase the late Ayatollah Khomeini's statement about ending the Iran-Iraq war in the late 1980s. MBN will have to convince King Salman and his son Muhammad that Gulf stability – domestically and regionally – serves Saudi interests.

If Gulf stability serves the Saudi strategic regional doctrine, then the on-going instability and repression in Bahrain would be viewed as detrimental to this doctrine and will have to be changed. If MBN survives the family's opaque, Byzantine machinations, he will be in a position to effect a fair and equitable compromise between the Al Khalifa ruling family and the Bahraini opposition. As regional stability also serves the American national interest, the Obama Administration should stand ready to help.

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