A Game of Thrones: Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia

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The Formation of the Principles of Succession

To a large extent, maintaining regime stability in Saudi Arabia relates to the transition of power among brothers rather than from father to son. It may be that this custom has ensured successors with the requisite experience to manage affairs of state, but it has also reduced the pool of potential heirs, resulting in the possibility that Saudi Arabia's aging leadership may negatively affect the nation's stability. Concern about succession struggles is not groundless, as the kingdom's selection process is not entirely institutionalized. Problems concerning succession of governance in monarchies are not unique to Saudi Arabia – Oman too could face them – but the status and importance of Saudi Arabia as the "custodian" of Islam's holy sites, its possession of the world's largest oil reserves, and its role as the leading political and military power among the Gulf's Arab states lends urgency to the Saudi situation. The advanced age and deteriorating health of King Salman and the nomination of Muhammad bin Nayef as the kingdom's new deputy crown prince suggest that a transition of power to the grandsons' generation, or at least a decision on the identity of the next heir, is closer than previously thought.

The formation of the process of succession in Saudi Arabia began during the reign of the country's first king and the founder of the modern Saudi state, Abdulaziz, also known as Ibn Saud. When the modern Saudi state was founded in 1932, the political structure relied primarily on the personal loyalty of the leaders of the dominant tribes to the king. Ibn Saud's principal task was to turn a regionalized tribal entity into a modern state with an effective central government. Attaining this goal also involved the

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ability to transfer the reins of government in a way that would not jeopardize the kingdom's stability. In 1933, he declared Saud as his successor, clearly intending to preserve the reins of control in the hands of his own family.[1] To prevent intra-family power struggles, he announced already then that Faisal would be the second in line to the throne after Saud.[2] Ibn Saud's other sons were placed in key positions of the central government, ensuring that when the time came, they would enjoy legitimacy as rulers and have experience in managing the affairs of state.[3] The desire for stability and consensus was a key feature in the process of building the state's institutions and continues to characterize the kingdom to this day.

Ibn Saud died without leaving a law defining royal succession, but the custom of power transfer among his sons was established, along with other principles of power transfer. The subsequent transfer of power to Faisal also entrenched the function of the ulama in providing the imprimatur to the Saudi royal family's decision. This custom not only provides the new king with religious legitimacy to rule, but also represents a stamp of approval of the historical alliance between the royal house and the Wahhabi strain of Islam (even though the ulama, whose members are appointed by the king, has never taken an independent stance on the transition of power and has always given its approval to the candidate deemed acceptable in the House of Saud family forum).

According to tribal custom, primogeniture was a decisive factor in succession, a custom also deeply rooted in the succession of Saudi rulers. Faisal, however, did not appoint his heir until 1965, a year after his own ascension to the throne, so as to make sure that the next crown prince would be worthy of the appointment. This decision entrenched the principle whereby the eldest brother – provided he is qualified – is appointed as heir apparent. Faisal divided authority among princes in specific disciplines and provinces and created a balance of power within the royal family so that the king functioned as the first among equals, and to a large extent his power depended on the princes.[4] Although this structure did not prevent power struggles within the family, it did contribute toward stability. The heir apparent, Khaled, ascended the throne in 1975 after Faisal's assassination and was crowned king the very same day. His younger brother, Fahd, had been appointed deputy crown prince during Faisal's reign and so ascended the throne immediately upon Khaled's death in 1982.

Power struggles among the sons of Ibn Saud erupted more than once, as a result of the fact that they were not full brothers and leading to the

creation of political camps defined by family lines. The prominent branch was the Sudairi, a group of seven princes born to the same mother and considered the most influential group in the family elite (the name is that of the tribe of their mother, Hassa Bint Ahmad al-Sudairi). Faisal worked to create a balance among the family's various branches and distributed the high ranking jobs among them, including control of the armed forces. Even now, the balance is largely intact: King Salman's son (a Sudairi), holds the defense portfolio, while Mutaib, son of the late King Abdullah, commands the National Guard.

Attempts to Institutionalize the Process

In the early 1990s, Fahd began to formalize Saudi Arabia's process of succession. The stationing of US troops on Saudi soil and to some extent Saudi Arabia's support for the Israeli-Arab peace process that started in Madrid ran into opposition from radical religious circles, which dared to challenge the legitimacy of the House of Saud.[5] This opposition pushed the kingdom to establish an advisory council (albeit one without any real power) and, for the first time, also enshrine in law the manner of transfer of power. Paragraph 5 of the Basic Law of Governance (1992) determines that the throne will pass to Ibn Saud's sons and grandsons.[6]

Fahd determined that only Ibn Saud's sons and their sons would be able to serve as king and be appointed crown prince, thereby allowing – at least on paper – the princes of the generation of Ibn Saud's grandchildren to claim the throne. Furthermore, Fahd made it clear that the king would be chosen on the basis of his qualifications and abilities and not just by age, as had been the custom.[7] While this formulation enshrined the basic principles in law, it did not spell out explicit directives or defined criteria for what constitutes the most qualified candidate, leaving the selection of the heir apparent an issue to be settled by the king and family consensus. In the long term, the kingdom cannot avoid translating the law into practice, even if the transition of power becomes more complicated as the crown goes to the grandsons' generation: balancing the interests of the different family branches can be expected to become a much more delicate, complex matter by virtue of the fact that the ambitions and interests of numerous princes – whose patience is not necessarily a given – must be taken into account.[8]

The deteriorating health of King Fahd, who suffered a stroke in 1995, resulted in the reins of power being handed to Abdullah. Although Fahd's

health did not allow him to manage the kingdom's affairs in practice, the rivalry between Abdullah and the Sudairi camp prevented him from earning the loyalty of the princes and being crowned officially until Fahd's death in 2005.[9] Abdullah's official reign was also marked by tensions between him and the Sudairis when Abdullah, breaking with family tradition, chose not to appoint a second successor until 2009, when Nayef was named second deputy to the prime minister as a result of Sultan's frail health and concern that a vacuum in governance might be created.[10]

Abdullah continue to entrench the succession arrangements and founded the Allegiance Council. Announced in 2006, it has 34 princes, all sons and grandsons of Ibn Saud, in charge of helping the next king choose his successor and arrange for the orderly transfer of power. The council is also supposed to serve as an interim government in case both the king and his heir die or are unable to function. One may also see the establishment of the council as Abdullah's attempt to limit the Sudairis' influence: although they still hold many key positions in the kingdom, they are restricted on the council, their numbers being identical to those of the other representatives. In any case, however, the council represents the formalization of the kingdom's custom since the death of Ibn Saud, whereby decisions on succession are made by the king after a consensus is reached in the family forum.

Although he established the council, King Abdullah involved it only sparingly in making decisions about his heirs. Indeed, upon establishing the council, Abdullah declared it would begin operating only after his own death, and therefore he was not obligated to consult it in appointing the crown prince. Thus, Nayef's 2009 appointment to second successor to the throne seems to have been Abdullah's own decision, without any input from the council. When Nayef passed away eight months after his appointment, Abdullah – in a rapid move intended to prevent strife and project stability and continuity – declared Salman heir without asking for the council's approval.[11] But in 2014, when Abdullah named Muqrin second successor, the council was convened: the appointment was supported with the votes of only some three-quarters of the council members.[12] The fact that many princes are still unhappy with the appointment is liable to place obstacles in Muqrin's way to the throne, and if and when he is chosen, they may well make it difficult for him to function and try to curb his power.

Key positions in the kingdom are another source of political clout and influence. Often, the holder of a senior position appoints his cronies as

deputies and successors so that it all becomes a family affair. This was the case with the Sudairis who appointed one another, resulting in their control of the defense and interior ministries for more than four decades. The political power embedded in such positions could also explain why Abdullah insisted on reserving the position of commander of the National Guard for himself even after he was tapped to become deputy crown prince. It is possible that he was worried that once Prince Fahd – who was the heir apparent at that time – ascended the throne, he would oust him from that position in favor of Sultan. The command of the National Guard and the loyalty Abdullah achieved were a significant counterweight to the Sudairi front and the regular army, then under Sultan's command.

The transition to the grandsons' generation may well prove a complex process. The traditional power centers, such as tribal connections, would seem to be less significant now than they were in the past. The many grandsons and the division into many sub-branches within the family are therefore a potential threat to the kingdom's stability.

The Challenges of Succession

Until recently the key challenge facing the Saudi royal household as it sets out to appoint future successors is the aging of the first generation of Ibn Saud's offspring. The current king, 80-year old Salman, is ill, and the potential pool of successors among Ibn Saud's sons is shrinking, forcing Saudi Arabia to prepare for the scepter being passed to the grandsons. The Basic Law of Governance laid the constitutional foundation for this move, but the process itself is liable to be complex and may involve renewed power struggles within the family.

Increasing the uncertainty is the fact that the process lacks transparency. Decisions are made within a small family forum and the announcement by the royal family comes only after the decision is made. An analysis of the situation and assessments of potential successors can therefore only be undertaken on the basis of the small amount of information leaking out of internal discussions and a survey of candidates currently holding key positions. Furthermore, any analysis must also consider other candidate-related data of equivalent weight, such as lineage, health, support among the princes, maternal origins, and closeness to the king. In the past, the ability to reach a consensus within the small family forum, numbering several dozens of princes, was the key to maintaining governing stability

in Saudi Arabia. By contrast, the number of Ibn Saud's grandsons is now in the hundreds.

At the same time, one cannot say that the Saudi leadership is reaching this historic crossroads totally unprepared. Provisions to transfer the reins of government to the next generation began more than two decades ago when the Basic Law of Governance was passed, underscoring that the royal household is aware that the transition is liable to represent a stiff challenge. Furthermore, in recent years several princes of the grandsons' generation have been promoted to ministers and governors of important provinces. As the number of grandsons serving in senior positions increases, so does the number of political power centers in the kingdom: every governor or minister wields extensive authority in his field, representing a political camp of his own (figure 1). These developments are liable to increase competition for appointments and positions at all echelons of the political system in Saudi Arabia, and not only for the throne itself. Still, despite the large number of Ibn Saud's grandsons, only a few have the requisite experience and stature to be considered potential successors. Of Ibn Saud's grandsons, the only two in truly significant positions are Interior Minister Muhammad bin Salman, 30, the defense minister and chief of his father's royal court (appointed in 2015), and Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, 63, who in 2013 was appointed to command the National Guard, the kingdom's most important security establishment.

Since the start of the regional upheavals, perhaps out of fear of their implications, Abdullah has made several important appointments.[13] In addition to promoting his son Mutaib to the rank of cabinet minister, Abdullah appointed his third son, Abdulaziz, to serve as deputy to Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal. Al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister since 1975, is also not in the best of health, and the king hopes that Abdulaziz will take al-Faisal's place when he steps down. Another son, Mashal, was appointed governor of Mecca, the most important province in Islam and the second most important province in the kingdom. His seventh son, Turki, a fighter pilot by training, was made governor of the capital city of Riyadh in 2014. This pattern of appointing relatives is standard. Kings appointed their sons the moment they ascended the throne: Faisal appointed his sons Saud, Turki, and Khaled to key positions, ensuring their high status to this day. The sons of Sultan, Nayef, and Salman also came to occupy senior positions thanks to their fathers' stature. Thus, Abdullah's recent appointments may be seen as an attempt to provide the royal family with

satisfactory, experienced candidates who can, when the time comes, fill the void left by Ibn Saud's aging sons, but also – and primarily – his desire to give his sons an edge in the future struggle for the crown after his death.

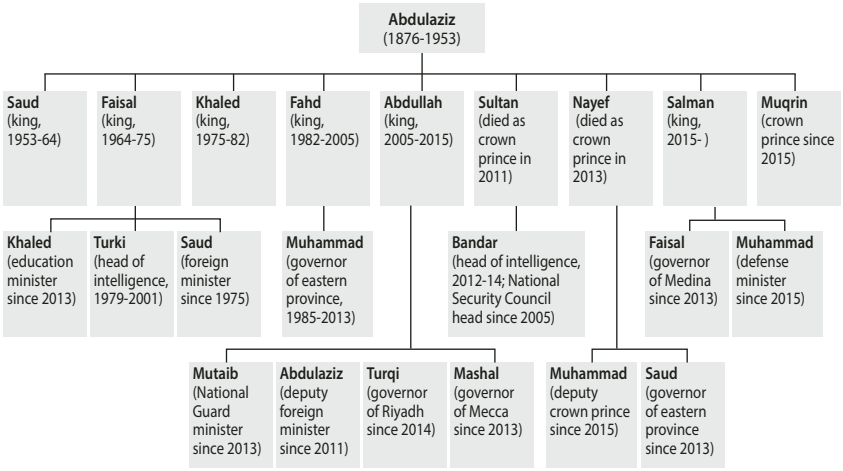

Figure 1. Key Members of the Saudi Royal Family

Conclusion

In March 2014, Prince Muqrin, Ibn Saud's youngest living son, was appointed second in line to the throne,[14] though due to his mother's Yemeni origins and the fact that she was a maidservant, he was at first thought to have slim chances of inheriting the crown. Muqrin, the former director general of al-Mukhabarat al-A'amah, the Saudi intelligence agency, and a former fighter pilot, is Ibn Saud's thirty-fifth son (his year of birth is commonly given as 1945).[15] Thus, his appointment in practice defers the transition to the grandsons' generation and symbolizes the preference for continuity and stability over progress and change. While compared to some of his brothers Muqrin has relatively little experience in security and foreign affairs, he was considered influential at court and close to King Abdullah. On more than one occasion he has been described by Western diplomats as Abdullah's "eyes and ears."[16] When Abdullah died, his half-brother, Crown Prince Salman, ascended the throne, though his reign is likely to be brief because of the state of his health. Immediately upon taking office, King Salman appointed Interior Minister Prince Muhammad bin Nayef bin Abdulaziz as the new deputy crown prince and second deputy prime

minister, meaning that he is third in line for the throne. For the first time in modern Saudi Arabian history, a grandson of the kingdom's first ruler, rather than a son, has a place in the line of succession – a move that injects clarity and vigor into the future succession of the al-Saud dynasty. Muhammad's way to the crown is well paved: Crown Prince Muqrin's credentials to be king continue to be questioned by senior princes; Muhammad has no sons – which might make his ascension less threatening to other princes; he is a Sudairi; and last but not least he is Washington's favorite candidate.

In the past, Saudi policy was intimately bound with the king's character and opinion. Although decisions are usually made in consultation and there is always the desire to reach agreement among the senior office holders in the royal household, the king has the final say. Therefore his identity is important in the setting of Saudi Arabia's policies. It is difficult to assess the style and policies of the next king because these tend, quite naturally, to change once the successor enters office; the situation always looks different when the shoe is on the other foot. When it comes to the nation's foreign policy, one may assume that the new Saudi Arabian king will try to mend relations with the United States, the country's most important ally and, like his predecessor, try to prevent Iran from further solidifying its influence in the region.

The main concern of the Saudi royal family is retaining their rule. The smoothness of the first ever generational transition suggests that the al-Sauds will do their best to do so. The Saudi model for royal succession will come under less strain than in recent years, but the manner of the transition of power to the next generation (a misleading term, as many of the princes of that generation are themselves quite elderly) and the effect of the process on the stability of governance in Saudi Arabia still depend, to a large extent, on the ability of the Allegiance Council to function as a body granting governmental legitimacy and mediating in disagreements and power struggles. The existence of an institutionalized family forum may help stabilize the Saudi monarchy during a crucial transitional phase ahead. Finally, the king's political abilities as mediator and arbitrator will be tested and be a critical factor in managing the complex succession process no less than the question of whether the members of the next generation will succeed in preserving the Saudi tradition that stresses the stability of the kingdom and continuity of the house of Saud as supreme values.

Notes

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