

Return of the king

Succession scenarios in Saudi Arabia

Social protests in the Middle East and North Africa have forced Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah to return to his country after a three-month absence. Guido Steinberg examines the political manoeuvring that is already underway to clarify the succession to the 87-year-old monarch.

KEY POINTS

- The return of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah to his country in February after a three-month absence demonstrated the regime's desire to reassure the population about the stability of the kingdom.
- However, political manoeuvring is already underway to clarify the succession, with the system of succession from brother to brother increasingly coming into question as the Saud family ages.
- The most likely outcome is that Interior Minister Nayef will follow Crown Prince Sultan in the succession, although such a decision only delays the difficulty of transferring the kingship to the third generation of the Saud family.

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While the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt have been ousted in recent weeks, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz returned to his country on 23 February, following a three-month absence. The 87-year-old monarch left Saudi Arabia in November 2010 to undergo back surgery in New York, before travelling to his palace in Morocco for rehabilitation.

The timing of the king's return was unlikely to have been a coincidence. With major social uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and prolonged protests in neighbouring Bahrain and Yemen, Abdullah's return may have been deemed necessary to quiet any potential dissatisfaction within Saudi Arabia. Although there have been few instances of social unrest in Saudi Arabia, the regime has been quick to pre-empt any possibility of contagion from the regional political turmoil. On the day of his return, Abdullah announced a USD36 billion social benefit package to be disbursed through

several different programmes.

The aim of this package appears to be to assuage any discontent and bolster support for the regime. On 5 March, the government announced that all marches and protests were banned, indicating the regime's desire to maintain control through inducements and enforcement. This is especially important given the king's prolonged absence, which revived speculation about the royal succession and the problems that may face the House of Saud over the next decade.

Succession plans

Since the death of Saudi Arabia's founder, King Abdulaziz bin Saud (commonly known as Ibn Saud), in 1953, the throne has passed in succession to his oldest surviving sons. When Saud was deposed in 1964, his brother Faisal took the throne, followed by his brother Khalid when Faisal was murdered by his nephew in 1975. Khalid was followed by Fahd, who died in 2005 and was succeeded by Abdullah. The current king's designated heir is his brother Crown Prince Sultan (born in 1925), who is both the crown prince and minister of defence. As succession between brothers goes by age, next in line is interior minister Nayef (born in 1933). Sultan has spent prolonged periods out of the country for medical treatment and his role in the daily decision-making of the kingdom may therefore be declining. When Abdullah was out of the country and Sultan incapacitated, Nayef emerged as a leading figure in Riyadh.

If Nayef is positioning himself as a candidate for the throne, this will have an impact on whether reform is carried out in the kingdom. Abdullah has demonstrated an understanding of the need for limited reform, for example by reducing the influence of powerful religious scholars. However, Nayef is viewed within Saudi Arabia as a conservative figure, suggesting he might pursue a more rigorous policy as king.

Such discussions have become more

pertinent following the regime changes in Egypt and Tunisia. Although there is no major dissident movement in Saudi Arabia agitating for reform or a regime change, there is potential for political instability around the royal succession, particularly at the stage when the candidate pool begins to shift from the generation of Ibn Saud's sons to his grandsons.

In October 2006, Abdullah seemingly formalised the procedures to be followed in the nomination of a crown prince. According to the new stipulations, the potential successor to the king must be named by an allegiance commission (Ha'at al-Bai'a), which is comprised of the 20 surviving sons of Ibn Saud; the eldest sons of the brothers who are either dead, incapacitated or uninterested; and one of the sons of the current king and his crown prince. The commission has 35 members in total and each member has one vote.

While this might have been interpreted as a first step towards institutionalisation, most observers did not believe that the traditional way of succession would simply be abolished. In fact, the whole process will only come into being after the accession of Sultan, demonstrating that the commission is not seen as an immediate forum for discussion of the succession. Furthermore, in March 2009, Nayef was named second deputy prime minister, a position deemed to designate him as the future crown prince because this was Sultan's position until the death of Fahd in 2005. The succession therefore still seems likely to be arranged outside the commission process.

As the age of the candidates indicates there may soon be a new king every two to three years, the current mode of succession involves the risk of political instability. The overriding problem that the Saud family does not seem to be able to solve is how to pass on the crown to the next generation of princes, many of whom are of an age to be considered as potential candidates. Conflicts between different groups in the family have hindered reaching a solution to the problem. Disagreements over succession might



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well plunge the country into political turmoil, which could in turn encourage social unrest and lead to regime instability, especially if these conflicts coincide with internal or external crises.

Political stability

The succession question is the most important issue threatening political stability in the kingdom. Although the succession has taken place relatively smoothly since 1964, this was despite fierce rivalries among the leading princes. The basic line of conflict followed a rift between the so-called Sudairi brothers and their rivals, chief among them being the current king. The so-called 'Sudairi seven' is a group of brothers that includes the late King Fahd, Sultan, Nayef and the powerful governor of Riyadh, Salman (born 1936).

Following Abdullah's death, all three candidates for the throne would be Sudairis – Sultan, Nayef and Salman. As well as the likelihood that kings will die at increasingly short intervals, some of the leading princes have demonstrated a tendency to promote the careers of their own offspring, increasing the likelihood of conflict even within the different groups of princes. Most importantly, Sultan appears to be promoting his son Khalid (born 1949), the commander-in-chief of the Saudi forces during the Gulf War in 1991, as a possible contender, while Nayef has tried to further the career of his son Muhammad

(born 1959). Both have leading positions in their fathers' respective ministries. The prospects of the grandsons will therefore fluctuate in accordance with their fathers' fortunes; with the interior ministry currently in control of Riyadh's Yemen policy, Muhammad bin Nayef currently appears to have the advantage over his rival.

These conflicts will make it difficult to reach an agreement between the familial factions about how to agree on the future succession. The issue is furthermore complicated by the sheer number of contenders. Among the possible successors are the sons of King Faisal: the governor of Mecca, Khalid (born in 1940), foreign minister Saud (born 1942) and the former head of the foreign intelligence service Turki (born 1945). Muhammad (born 1951), the son of King Fahd and governor of the restive eastern province, might also be a candidate. Others include Muhammad bin Nayef and Khalid bin Sultan as well as the new head of the National Guard and son of the current king, Mitab bin Abdullah (born 1953).

One of the strengths of the brother-to-brother succession system has been that it has allowed a consensus to be reached, encouraging political stability. However, maintaining this equilibrium will become increasingly difficult as the potential candidates age and manoeuvring begins over how best to manage

the transition to the next generation. While this uncertainty has not as yet translated into instability, a publicly fractious transition process could encourage greater expressions of dissent.

Social stability

Saudi Arabian society as a whole remains extremely stable, although sectarian and economic issues have the potential to increase internal tensions. One of the key factors underpinning social stability is the administration's use of its oil revenues to provide a good standard of living and prevent dissatisfaction with the regime.

In Saudi Arabia's tightly policed society, dissent is both unlikely and uncommon. However, social concerns may pose a long-term risk to regime stability, especially when combined with sectarian discrimination. The Saudi Arabian political system is based on an alliance between the rulers and the Wahhabiyya, a Sunni religious reform movement that is fervently anti-Shia. As a consequence, the kingdom's approximately two million Shias (out of a local population of around 20 million) are subject to socio-economic and political discrimination. This is especially dangerous because they live mostly in the strategic oil-rich eastern province of the country, which was the location of some limited protests taking place in February. Although Abdullah has addressed some



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Saudi soldiers on patrol in the southern province of Jizan, near the border with Yemen, Saudi Arabia, in November 2009. The ministry of the interior took control of the Yemen campaign, boosting the position of Prince Nayef. If the prince is positioning himself as a candidate for the throne, this will have an impact on whether reform is carried out in the kingdom. Nayef is viewed within Saudi Arabia as a conservative figure, suggesting he might pursue a more rigorous policy as king.

of their grievances since 2003, for example by partly lifting the ban on public Shia religious ceremonies and investing in the physical infrastructure of Shia towns and quarters, the Shias remain largely isolated within Saudi Arabian society.

Economic stability

Saudi Arabia has weathered the world financial and economic crises of 2009 well, with oil revenues remaining high enough to continue Abdullah's ambitious development programmes. In contrast to many other Arab countries, Saudi Arabia did not have to reduce subsidies for fuel and housing. Nevertheless, its economy remains extremely vulnerable because of its dependence on oil exports, with approximately 70 to 80 per cent of total income and about 40 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) stemming from energy export revenues. The government has made several attempts to diversify the economy, but this has only led to limited results in the highly subsidised petrochemical sector. More importantly, in 2000 the Saudi government opened up its upstream gas sector for foreign investments. However, this 'gas initiative' has not reduced the kingdom's dependence on oil.

For the time being, oil prices will remain high enough for the Saudi government to meet its needs, as demonstrated by the major welfare spending programme announced in February, raising the salaries of all public employees by

15 per cent and promising aid to debtors and students. Since Saudi Arabia is not set to run out of oil for several decades, it is unlikely that financial problems will force the government to change this strategy in the medium term.

Military and security stability

The Saudi ruling family's main focus is the security of the regime itself. For decades, its main fear was of being overthrown by a military coup, mirroring those of Egypt, Syria or Iraq in the 1950s and 1960s. As a consequence, the Saudi Arabian army has never developed into an effective fighting force and there is no prospect that it will become one in the near future. Of the approximately 233,500-strong armed forces, 75,000 are regular army and 100,000 National Guard. As a consequence, the army is unlikely to be able to mount a successful coup. Although equipped with state-of-the-art Western weapons systems, its units have struggled to absorb these because of a lack of technical knowledge and trained manpower. The National Guard is tasked specifically with the protection of the royal family and is based closer to the capital, putting it in a strong position to defend against any attempt by the army to take power.

In 2007, a new force of 35,000 was founded to protect the country's oil fields in response to fears that Al-Qaeda could increasingly target these facilities. This move was part of a major overhaul of the Saudi domestic

security services, which became necessary after a terrorist campaign orchestrated by Al-Qaeda from May 2003 revealed a serious lack of effectiveness and professionalism on the part of the Saudi security services. Deputy Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayef spearheaded these security reforms, raising his political profile in the process. From 2004, the Saudi police and intelligence services steadily improved their performance and effectively destroyed Al-Qaeda's presence in the kingdom during the course of 2006. The militant group is only likely to regain the ability to mount renewed attacks in the event of widespread social turmoil and a general deterioration of the security situation.

External stability

Saudi Arabia's main regional rival is Iran, which it views as the primary threat to regional stability. Riyadh faces some difficulties in formulating its stance towards Iran: on the one hand it fears the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran, but on the other, a military campaign against Iran would cause major regional repercussions. US diplomatic cables released by whistle-blowing website WikiLeaks in late 2010 suggest that, in private, Abdullah and other Saudi politicians had made it clear to their US allies that they preferred a military strike to Iran getting the bomb.

Beyond Iran's push towards nuclear capability, Saudi Arabia's concern is that a nuclear-armed Iran could use its leverage to incite the Saudi Shias in the east to revolt against Saudi rule. This fear informs Riyadh's current relations with Tehran; Saudi Arabia is concerned by what it sees as increased Iranian influence in several of its neighbours. Most importantly, it regards the Huthi rebels in northern Yemen, who have waged an insurgency against the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh since 2004, as an Iranian fifth column. It has therefore supported Sanaa financially. Furthermore, Saudi troops intervened on the side of the government forces in November 2009, provoking fears of a regional escalation. While the Huthi rebellion has calmed since this date, revived unrest around the border areas could force Saudi Arabia to intervene again.

Risk factors	April 2011
Political risk	Minimal
Social risk	Minimal
Economic risk	Low
Military and security risk	Minimal
External risk	Minimal
Total country risk	Minimal

Three future scenarios

With King Abdullah's death likely in the next few years, these scenarios examine the three most likely succession options for the Saudi royal family and how these might affect the country's stability over the medium to long term.

Scenario one: The sons scenario

Probability High

In a highly probable scenario, the House of Saud would adhere to the traditional mode of succession. After Abdullah's death, Sultan would become king. However, his reign would be in name only, as Sultan appears to suffer from dementia and is unlikely to be able to carry out all his ceremonial functions. The key figure would be Minister of the Interior Nayef, who would be able to position himself as king-in-waiting. That he might overtake Sultan became clear in 2009, when an internal conflict erupted over responsibility for Yemeni affairs.

In the case of Nayef assuming the throne, Abdullah's campaign of slow reforms would probably come to a halt and the regime would emphasise security matters over social and economic reform. However, as the ruling family rules by consensus and Nayef would govern

together with more liberal-minded princes, his rule would probably not herald a sharply more authoritarian era in Saudi Arabia.

In this outcome, with Nayef dominant, Salman would be next in line after Nayef and the last universally accepted potential successor among the sons of Ibn Saud. Most importantly, Salman is still some years older than most prominent contenders in the grandsons' generation and several of his remaining younger brothers lack the characteristics that have been deemed necessary for a future king. Nevertheless, some younger brothers have assumed more prominent positions in recent years. For instance, Muqrin, the powerful chief of the General Intelligence Directorate, was born in 1943. If he or other younger sons assumed the throne, the succession by the sons process could last for the next 20 years.

Maintaining the traditional mode of succession would provoke resistance, especially from

the current generation of Ibn Saud's grandsons, who would probably lose their chance to ascend the throne, given their advanced age. With the prospect of ageing Saudi kings dying every two to three years, the opportunities for internal dissent would increase in the absence of a coherent reform or repression strategy. Such opportunities could increase following Salman's death, after which major political infighting is likely to take place.

Risk factors	Scenario one
Political risk	Low
Social risk	Minimal
Economic risk	Low
Military and security risk	Minimal
External risk	Minimal
Total country risk	Minimal

Scenario two: A compromise candidate

Probability Moderate

There is every indication that the struggle over succession in the next generation (meaning the generation of grandsons of Ibn Saud) has already begun. This became most obvious during the Saudi intervention in neighbouring Yemen between November 2009 and February 2010. Deputy Minister of Defence Khalid bin Sultan used the opportunity to promote his public profile by appearing in the Saudi media as an uncompromising defender of Saudi sovereignty and territorial integrity, while the relatively poor performance of Saudi troops against the Huthi rebels and the high numbers of casualties was not being publicised.

The possibility of a compromise candidate is plausible because the creation of the allegiance commission was a strong indication that at least some members of the ruling family understood the importance of finding a more long-term solution to the succession question than the 'sons scenario' might provide. As a consequence, for years there has been speculation about a possible compromise candidate, which at first centred on one

of the sons of Ibn Saud. Salman has been named since the 1990s, because observers believed that he might be the only one that his full brothers Sultan and Nayef might be willing to accept in their stead. Now it has become clear that neither of them is willing to give up his claim, observers have begun trying to identify possible candidates from the grandsons' generation.

To be generally acceptable, this compromise candidate would probably have to be someone whose sons did not harbour any major ambitions, so that there would be no danger of any candidate trying to establish his own dynasty. This holds true for example for the sons of former King Faisal, who are frequently named as possible future kings, especially by United States observers.

A compromise candidate from the grandsons' generation might give the ruling family some more years to find a longer-term solution to the conflicts over succession. Such a compromise would suit the political culture of the kingdom, where problems are often solved after long delays because no consensus can be found at first. Nevertheless, the prospects for agreeing a compromise candidate are not good because of the

respect for age most members of the Saud family share. Furthermore, such a compromise would damage the ambitions of several older grandsons of Ibn Saud, provoking resistance from the sons of Sultan and Nayef and possibly others. Most rivals would have difficulty justifying open opposition to a rational solution. In the medium term, this scenario would promise more stability than the sons scenario, but would only delay difficult decisions about the future of succession. In the case of a compromise candidate from Abdullah's camp, such as Khalid al-Faisal, a continuation of cautious reforms would be likely, reducing the likelihood of domestic discontent.

Risk factors	Scenario two
Political risk	Minimal
Social risk	Minimal
Economic risk	Low
Military and security risk	Minimal
External risk	Minimal
Total country risk	Minimal

Scenario three: The allegiance commission

Probability

Low

With the founding of the allegiance commission in 2006, a potential means of solving the problem of succession into the next generation has already been created. In theory, this would provide a forum in which the new crown prince could be selected, with the more transparent process reducing the potential for damaging internecine manoeuvring. Moreover, the clearer process would reduce domestic uncertainty about the next king and provide a guarantee of familial stability, regardless of the eventual choice of candidate. This could help to assuage the potential for domestic dissent and forestall concerns about the longevity of the dynasty.

If the allegiance commission were adopted, it is likely that much of the negotiation would still take place outside the forum, with the main candidates seeking to win support from among the members of the royal family who could not hope to be selected themselves. It is unclear who might be selected by the commission, although Salman, who has a history of acting as

an arbitrator in the family, might again prove a good compromise candidate. Institutionalising the commission would serve to entrench the process after Salman, by which time the ages of those concerned means that the succession would naturally pass to the grandsons' generation.

This selection mechanism would not necessarily guarantee a stable system. Nevertheless, it would signal that the ruling family had decided to address one of the most dangerous problems for the stability of the Saudi state as a precondition for a more thorough reform of the country's political system.

However, as there is every indication that Sultan and Nayef will not give up their ambitions and might even try to secure the succession for one of their sons, it is not likely that this mechanism will be adopted before their deaths. A further reason for them to reject an election of the new crown prince through the allegiance commission is that it would give non-Sudairis a majority. In fact, when the commission was founded, it seems to have been the motivation of Abdullah to sideline Nayef and keep him from becoming the next

crown prince and keep another Sudairi from assuming the throne. As a consequence of Abdullah's failure in this regard, the allegiance commission might never come into effect.

Nonetheless, the existence of the allegiance commission, even if not currently operational, has raised expectations both among the ruling family and the population about the future method of determining the succession. Abolishing the allegiance commission could send negative signals about the various candidates' willingness to compromise and receptiveness to reform. As such, the commission may remain nominally in existence, even if the real decisions are made outside it.

Risk factors	Scenario three
Political risk	Low
Social risk	Minimal
Economic risk	Low
Military and security risk	Minimal
External risk	Minimal
Total country risk	Minimal

CONCLUSION

As the candidates for royal succession age, Saudi Arabia appears to be heading towards political stagnation, if not prolonged conflict over succession within the ruling family. While Saudi Arabia has been more successful in forestalling and containing potential dissent than Egypt and Tunisia, the example of the uprisings in North Africa in early 2011 could spur greater domestic demands for reform and will have concerned the Saud family.

Externally, the greatest uncertainty for Saudi Arabia will remain Iran, and the potential for military action by the United States or Israel. In such an event, Saudi Arabia and the small Gulf states would probably bear the brunt of Iranian retaliation. Even if military action is averted, Iran's rivals will continue trying to limit Tehran's rising influence in the region. In this situation, strong leadership is needed for Saudi Arabia to confront the Iranian challenge in the Persian Gulf region and the Arab east. With Egypt likely to be preoccupied by internal problems for years to come, the anti-Iranian countries in the region will increasingly look to Saudi Arabia for leadership. As the pronounced lack of political dynamism in Riyadh has

already weakened the kingdom in recent years, its government will only be able to provide regional leadership after a generational change in the ruling elite.

Internally, the regime does not have to fear an opposition movement like the ones in Egypt and Tunisia and the Saud family's power base in the centre of the country should remain intact. Most people in the western regions of Hijaz and Asir are also unlikely to revolt. The one area in which potential unrest may arise is in the eastern region, with the Saudi Shias showing marked signs of discontent. Although Saudi Shias look towards Iraq first, Iran might be able to use this situation to garner support in the future.

To assuage potential discontent, the ruling family would need to end discrimination against religious minorities to shore up their support for the regime. However, this would entail ending the traditional alliance between the Saudi family and the Wahhabi religious scholars, which the royal family might view as too potentially destabilising in itself.

Revolutions in the region and pressure from the US might spur the Saud family to rethink whether it is ready to sacrifice its

traditional power base to secure the survival of the dynasty. Yet the major political reforms that such a decision would require are unlikely to be supported by the current leading candidates for the throne, leaving this decision to the next generation. Despite Saudi Arabia's high level of stability, the uprisings in North Africa demonstrated the underlying tensions that could break out within apparently stable regimes: an example that the Saud family will go to great lengths to avoid following. ■

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Author

Guido Steinberg is a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).

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