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## Saudi Transition Poses No Risk to U.S. Security Interests but Offers Little Promise of Change on the Domestic Front

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## **Saudi Transition Poses No Risk to U.S. Security Interests but Offers Little Promise of Change on the Domestic Front**

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The succession of power in Saudi Arabia from the late King Abdallah to his designated successor and half-brother Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Sa`ud will have little impact on the Kingdom's foreign, security and oil policies. Salman's accession as well as that of the new Crown Prince, Abd al-Aziz's youngest son Muqrin, were approved months ago in a council established by King Abdallah and representing the major elements of the ruling family.<sup>1</sup> And while his decision to maintain oil production despite the slumping market price and insistence on implementing a new succession policy may be unpopular within the family, still the Al Sa`ud will maintain public solidarity and not air differences that could encourage domestic uncertainty in the future.

Saudi national interests do not change with a change in ruler. Saudi security concerns, in particular, remain the same under King Salman as they were under King Abdallah. They are primarily regional ones – the fate of Syrian President Assad, the consequences of the collapse of the Hadi government in Yemen, the confrontation with the Islamic caliphate in Iraq and its threat to the Arabian Peninsula states, and the underlying threat that Iran is believed to pose to Saudi

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<sup>1</sup> Abdallah created the Allegiance Council in 2007 to help determine the succession. Its members are all survivors and heirs of the 44 recognized sons of the Kingdom's founder, Abd al-Aziz Ibn Sa`ud. This is the first test of the Council; in practice, it has only ratified the king's decisions after the fact.

and Gulf security. Riyadh and Washington will continue to share these concerns and cooperate strategically to resolve them in their mutual interest.

### ***King Salman - a place-holder in the Political Transition***

King Salman at 79 is not in the best of health. He has had at least one stroke and there are questions about his ability to manage decision-making and run the daily affairs of government. He is probably a transitional figure as the generation of the sons of Ibn Sa`ud run out of appropriate candidates and the grandsons take over. Prince Muqrin's selection as Crown Prince comes as no surprise. Selected by King Abdallah, Muqrin, a relatively youngish 69, served as governor of the province of Medina and then headed Saudi intelligence before being named second deputy prime minister in February 2013. He was educated at the British Royal Air Force College and served as a pilot in the Royal Saudi Air Force. Like many Saudis in the security and intelligence services, Muqrin is probably well-known to U.S. counterparts.

Muqrin's successor as second deputy prime minister and ultimately as successor and Crown Prince when Salman goes, is 55-year old Prince Mohammed bin Na`if. The Prince, who is the first of the grandsons of Ibn Sa`ud to be named to a senior post, was educated in the United States and is considered by many Americans and Saudis to be a close friend of the U.S. He is also a staunch opponent of Islamic extremists, who tried to assassinate him in 2009 when he was Saudi security chief. Three years later he was named Interior Minister, a position he continues to hold in the new government. His ultimate accession would complete the transition to power of the rising generation of grandsons of Ibn Sa`ud. Salman could try to change this by introducing one of his sons into the immediate succession but this would require the support of competitive elements within the family, a struggle the Al Sa`ud could little afford.<sup>2</sup>

### ***What will change in Riyadh mean for Washington?***

Security commitments and relationships between the Saudi and American governments are not likely to change significantly over the next 3-5 years. King Salman, Crown Prince Muqrin and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Na`if have worked closely with the United States and its security forces in their previous

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<sup>2</sup> Salman is believed to have 50 sons, including the first Arab and Muslim astronaut, Prince Sultan; the governor of Medina, Prince Faisal; and Prince Khaled, a fighter pilot in the Royal Saudi Air Force who led [the first RSAF mission against Islamic State targets](#) in Syria last year.

positions and will almost certainly continue to do so. Riyadh and Washington will remain united in their opposition to international terrorism and the violent Islamic extremist groups, such as ISIL, Jabhat al-Nusrat, al-Qaida, and the Islamic caliphate. For many in the United States and Europe, however, there is a problem with those sympathetic to the particular literal version of Islam advocated by Saudi Wahhabi Muslims and the support given to *salafi* (extreme Sunni religious) factions globally. The Islamic caliphate poses a direct threat to the Al Sa`ud rule in challenging their authority and legitimacy but not to their Wahhabi religious values or interpretation of Islamic doctrine. Ideology as such does not play a primary role nor does Saudi Arabia acknowledge any differences, a point Prince Turki al-Faisal made in a recent article in the Arab press.<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, Turki has urged the West to worry less about Islamic groups and more about defeating Syrian President Bashar al-Asad.

The Saudis will also continue to question U.S. willingness to support its commitments to Saudi security, and they point to our abandonment of other regional allies – President Mubarak and the Shah are examples – who lost power in part, they will remind us, because of their relations with the United States and America’s double standard in backing Israel and ignoring the Palestinians. They are certainly uneasy with the apparent eagerness with which they see the U.S. pursuing ties to Iran in nuclear negotiations and may assume they will not be consulted in other U.S. efforts to improve relations with the Islamic Republic. Effusive eulogies about King Abdallah will not change this mind-set.

Saudi domestic policies under King Salman and probably under his successors Muqrin and Muhammad bin Na`if are not likely to change dramatically. Saudi Arabia will not soon become a more open and participatory political system and civil society will likely fail to thrive. The family, which estimates claim includes an estimated 2,000-7,000 royal princes (direct descendants of the original Al Sa`ud), will continue to have an unfair advantage in dominating the economy and enjoying the benefits of its wealth. Its prominent princes will remain close to the religious institution dominated by the Al Shaykh descendants of the first Wahhabi cleric, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, in part because they are very conservative in

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<sup>3</sup> See “A New Name for ISIS,” article by Prince Turki al-Faisal published in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* 15 January 2015; <http://www.aawsat.net/author/prince-turki-al-faisa>. Turki, who was former head of Iraqi intelligence and Ambassador to the United States, blamed Iran, Saddam Husayn, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, Bashar al-Asad and “Western reluctance to arm and support the FSA completely” for the successes of the Islamic caliphate/ISIL, which he described as “out of touch with reality and ignorant of international laws.”

religious terms and in part because the alliance keeps them in power and in control of the national narrative. Some Saudis and most foreign observers of Saudi political behavior perceive these close ties with ultra-conservative clerics and loyalists to be the greatest potential threat to the Kingdom, but few will raise this issue in Arabia or with influential Saudis.

All of which could raise some problems for the United States diplomatically and ethically. Women are not likely to obtain the vote, except in a few municipal elections, unlikely they will drive and, more importantly, they may continue to be unable to choose careers, travel or marry without the permission of the male elders in the family or tribe. King Salman, Crown Prince Muqrin and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Na`if are known for their social conservatism and suppression of dissent. Given the ongoing turmoil on their borders and throughout the region, Saudi commentators predict the regime will continue to use counter-terrorism laws to suppress criticism of the regime and calls for reform, including those using social media.

Finally, past behaviors are not the best indicators of behavior once in power. Decision-making is an opaque process at best in Saudi Arabia and diplomats as well as most Saudi analysts and academics are uncertain what positions King Salman, Crown Prince Muqrin and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Na`if hold on the long-term issues facing the kingdom, not just reconciling social change and a young population with conservative traditions and an oil-dependent economy but also in future engagement in Yemen's wars or involvement in Iraqi, Lebanese, Egyptian, or Syrian politics. Jamal Khashoggi, general manager of *al-Arab News* and a prominent Saudi figure, said of Prince Muhammad bin Na'if when he was appointed Interior Minister in 2012, "I would assume he's from the second generation of princes who are more receptive to ideas of reform. But he is good at making everybody think he is in their camp. That's what makes a successful politician."<sup>4</sup> The same can be said for most politicians.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Angus McDowall in "Profile: New Saudi Deputy Crown Prince marks generational shift," [Reuters](http://www.ubs.wallst.com/ubs/mkt_story.asp?docKey=1329-L5N0B67FG-1&first=0), 23 January 2015. [http://www.ubs.wallst.com/ubs/mkt\\_story.asp?docKey=1329-L5N0B67FG-1&first=0](http://www.ubs.wallst.com/ubs/mkt_story.asp?docKey=1329-L5N0B67FG-1&first=0)

