U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONS AFTER KING FAHD
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King Fahd in many ways summarized the contradictions in the U.S.-Saudi relationship. He was a stalwart ally in the Cold War, and an intimate partner in the Afghan war which helped usher the end of the Soviet Union. At the same time, he helped support the factions which became the Taliban, and he gave power to religious groups that many accuse of promoting extremism.

His successor, King Abdullah, has been an outspoken but cautious reformer in his decade of day-to-day control over the Kingdom. His formal ascension to the throne is unlikely to change much. The new crown prince, Sultan, has been the presumptive choice for years, so there is no imminent struggle for power. Sultan, however, is recovering from cancer, and like many senior Saudis is suffering from the maladies of advanced age.

For more than a half century, the Saudi royal family has been led by the sons of King Abdel Aziz. At some point, the leadership will move to his grandchildren. Before that, Saudi Arabia could potentially go through a period similar to the Soviet Union in the early 1980s, when a series of elderly rulers followed each other in quick succession. It is worth remembering as well that the oldest of Abdel Aziz’s grandsons are now in their late 60s. An increasing number of Arab states are being led by young and dynamic leaders. While a future Saudi ruler may be dynamic, it is unlikely one will be young in the foreseeable future.

The Saudi royal family is united on the need for reform, but they are divided in how those reforms should be implemented. Strong leadership will make a dramatic difference in how change unfolds in the Kingdom, and the health or illness of Fahd’s successors could be the crucial—and most unpredictable—determining factor.

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