

## The True Nature of the Saudi Succession “Crisis”

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

**January 9, 2015**

Every time a Saudi king gets seriously ill or dies, this triggers yet another media frenzy over a Saudi succession crisis. There is yet another round of speculation about major conflicts within the royal family, the destabilization of Saudi Arabia, and how the various tensions within the Kingdom could somehow trigger a civil crisis or conflict. King Abdullah’s illness is no exception. Anyone who has written on Saudi Arabia already has a flood of calls about what will happen if he dies, whether Saudi Arabia will have a massive political crisis, the royal family will self-destruct, or it will somehow be taken over by jihadist extremists.

Some of this concern is natural. King Abdullah has been an exceptional ruler, and one who has led Saudi Arabia through a remarkably turbulent period in the Middle East. He first began to serve as de facto ruler when King Fahd had a stroke in 1995, and has been King since August 2005 – a period of nearly two decades. Throughout that period, a man who was sometimes reported to be anti-American and ultra-conservative before he took power has been a strong ally and a major reformer.

### Progress Under King Abdullah

Outsiders can argue the pace of these reforms, but King Abdullah has presided over the steady modernization and liberalization of the Saudi economy. Education is still scarcely modern, but Saudi Arabia now has modern private universities, a steadily growing number of young Saudis studying in the United States, and more women graduate from secondary school and universities than men. King Abdullah has sharply reduced corruption and limited the privileges of members of the royal family. Saudi budgets and five-year plans have steadily budgeted for the diversification of the economy, better infrastructure, health and education. Unlike most of the Arab world, Saudi Arabia also made major new investments in areas like education, job creation for Saudi youth, improved housing, and the other critical economic and social needs that create so much instability in the Arab world after 2011.

The Saudi government and its security services have been steadily modernized, preserving close ties to the United States at every level. Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism activities have become steadily more effective, and have worked as close partners to those of the United States ever since Saudi Arabia was first challenged by Al Qaeda in the Arabia Peninsula in 2003. U.S. and Saudi tensions have focused on how best to deal with Iran, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, and Islamic extremism; not on the need to cooperate or address the problems involved.

The Saudi government has quietly controlled the more extreme elements of the Saudi clergy, limited the role of the religious police, and moved toward evolutionary reform – an evolution that reflects the fact that the Saudi royal family is not a group of conservatives suppressing a more liberal population, but part of an elite that includes technocrats and business leaders and that has steadily modernized a conservative population ever since the days of Ibn Saud.

Under King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia has modernized key aspects of the Saudi justice system. It built up the role of legislative bodies like its Consultative Council or *Majlis* as-Shura, and even experimented with elections in 2005 and 2011 – with King Abdullah granting women the right to vote and stand for office in the municipal elections due this year – although the result of the past two elections was so tribal and conservative that it produced considerable caution about the pace of further reform.

It is also important to note from a selfish outside view, that the Kingdom's role in leading the other Southern Arab states in the Gulf Cooperation Council, in working with Jordan and Morocco, in providing aid to Egypt and other Arab states, and advocating the Arab peace plan has played a key global strategic role in ensuring the stable flow of petroleum exports to the world economy ever since the late 1970s, during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1988, and during the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait in 1990-1991. Saudi Arabia has been critical to preserving some degree of regional stability in the face of a growing Iranian threat, during the rise of Islamic extremism that followed the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and during the new wave of upheavals that began in the spring of 2011.

### **Challenges Under and After King Abdullah**

This is scarcely to say that Saudi Arabia does not have problems, should not move faster in many areas, and does not need to carry out a continuing stream of social, political, and economic reforms. The role of women clearly must change so Saudi Arabia can use their talent and skills more productively. The Shi'ite minority needs more rights and equality. Education needs to modernize as fast as Saudi society will permit. The scope and power of legislative and elected bodies needs to increase.

Saudi Arabia has faced, and will face, constant challenges in finding the pace of modernization and reform that pushes forward as fast as possible while retaining Saudi popular support, meeting Saudi Arabia's unique religious and cultural needs, and ensuring that evolution will not turn into either regression or revolution. As events in other parts of the region since 2011 have shown all too clearly, it is easy to get things terribly wrong and very hard to keep them going right.

Above all, the Saudi government needs to ensure that its rapidly growing population will have meaningful jobs and futures. It is almost impossible for outsiders to really understand the demographic dynamics involved, and estimates do differ sharply according to different sources.

However, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the Saudi population grew from 3.86 million in 1950 to 7.2 million in 1975, 21.3 million in 2000, and 27.8 million in 2015, and will grow to 31.9 million in 2025, and 40.3 million in 2050 – in spite of the fact its annual population growth rate dropped from 2.9% in 1975 to 1.5% in 2015, and is projected to drop to 0.7% in 2050.

For all of the Kingdom's progress, it is also important to note that the CIA estimates that some 261,000 males, and a total of at least 506,000 men and women will reach job age in 2015 – and enter a market-driven labor force of 8.4 million, only about 1.7 million of which is now Saudi. This is an incredible challenge in terms of internal stability.

While Saudi Arabia has largely met the challenge of dealing with this “youth bulge” under King Abdullah, it is important to note that its oil wealth was relative even in a period when petroleum prices were far higher than they are today. Again estimates differ, but the CIA and U.S. Energy Information Agency estimate that the Saudi per capita income was \$31,300 in 2013, and the Saudi petroleum income per capita was \$8,939.

To put this in perspective, the United States has a per capita income of \$52,800. A truly oil wealthy state like Qatar had a per capita income of \$102,100 in 2013, and a petroleum income per capita of \$40,943, although a seemingly wealthier UAE had a per capita income of only \$29,900 in 2013, and a petroleum income per capita of \$9,736.

Saudi Arabia must also use its limited funds to deal with far poorer and fractious neighbors whose problems pose a threat. Iran had a per capita income of \$12,800 in 2013. Iraq had a per capita income of \$7,100 in 2013, and a petroleum income per capita of \$2,700. Yemen, whose oil income is negligible in per capita terms, had a total per capita income of only \$2,500. There are many reasons why Saudi Arabia has some of the highest national security expenditures in the world. The Kingdom faces very real threats and has very real enemies – many of which are non-state actors that constantly threaten both terrorist violence and its legitimacy as custodian of Islam's most important holy places.

### **The “Threat” Posed by Succession**

America and other outsiders do have reason to be concerned about the challenges and threats Saudi Arabia will face after King Abdullah. There are reasons for the close and enduring national security partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia. But, and it is a critical *but*, it is far from clear that the focus on the succession should be anything like the focus of such concerns.

First, it is important to ask what senior member of the royal family would slow King Abdullah's pace of reform, weaken Saudi Arabia's security partnership with the United States or other member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or make any other important and negative shift in Saudi Arabia's policies? It is all very well to talk about royal power struggles, and royal politics are certainly very

real – although one should remember that the United States has divisive politics of its own and faces the threat of a popular coup every four years. However, royal politics do not seem to have any key divisions over the most critical aspects of the Kingdom's policies.

The royal family's dissenters are marginal at best, and more reform oriented – not ultraconservative. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has not faced a serious internal political battle since King Faisal rescued the government from an inept and wasteful King Saud during 1962-1964 – in the middle of a crisis over the rising influence of Nasser. That was also a time when the formal structure of Saudi Arabia government was still relatively weak and primitive, its budget badly and arbitrarily managed, its security forces have uncertain loyalty, and its overall continuity of government was tenuous at best. None of these conditions exist today.

Second, Saudi Arabia is scarcely an absolute monarchy. It does not wait for a succession for key members of its royal family, its senior ministers, and other leading policy voices to debate virtually every issue – with considerable help from its Majlis and media. It is not a democracy, but merit as much as birth is the key to influence. Moreover, virtually every key issue is debated internally and resolved with some degree of consensus. The choice of king really does matter, but so does the rest of Saudi Arabia's senior leadership.

Third, the Saudi government has a large and stable structure. There is no exact way to measure the number of key figures in the government, but there are some 33-35 critical ministries and other senior appointments. A total of eleven are held by members of the royal family, and eight by senior princes that are the grandsons, rather sons of Ibn Saud. Some 23 are technocrats. They will play a critical role in preserving the continuity of power during the succession, and most will remain in office regardless of how the succession progresses.

Fourth, King Abdullah already prepared for his succession by reshuffling several key positions in his cabinet on December 7, 2014, including culture, telecommunications, transportation, agriculture and appointing younger ministers who could provide both continuity and a new level of energy and effort. He appointed a new Minister of Education, Prince Faisal bin Abdullah Muhammed Al-Saud to succeed H.E. Dr. Abdullah Ibn Saleh Bin-Obaid, and a woman, Noura Fayeze to the new post of Deputy Minister of Women's Education. He named Dr. Abdullah Al-Rabeeah as the new Minister of Health, and Mohammed ibn Abdul Kareem Al-Issa as the new Minister of Justice.

He also appointed Muhammad Al-Jasser as Governor of the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), Saudi Arabia's central bank and a critical part of the government's effort to manage and develop an economy. He replaced Islamic Affairs Minister Sheikh Saleh bin Abdulaziz al-Ashaikh – a descendent of Muhammad al-Wahab – with a new Minister that was not a member of the Al Shaikh family. All of these appointments seem to have been designed ensure that Saudi Arabia

would increase the pace of modernization, not simply preserve continuity of his existing programs.

It is in this context, that one should look at the actual line of succession. King Abdullah may well recover from his present illness. He is, however, over 90, and Saudi Arabia is reaching the point where the choice of the next king may be far less important than the one that brings the next generation of senior princes to the throne. The sons of Saudi Arabia's modern founder – Ibn Saud – are all reaching an age where this change is becoming inevitable. King Abdullah has already outlived two Crown Princes, and the current Crown Prince, Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud – who is also Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense—is at least 78 years old and is reported to be seriously ill.

Reports do differ sharply over just how ill Prince Salman really is – and medical reports on the illnesses of the Saudi royal family can be grossly inaccurate. King Abdullah did, however, appoint Prince Muqrin bin Abd al-Aziz to the new post of Deputy Crown Prince in March 2014, and had appointed him as Deputy Prime Minister in February 2014. Prince Muqrin has been closely linked to Abdullah and his policies of modernization and reform, and is the youngest surviving son of Ibn Saud, having been born in 1945.

King Abdullah also shook up several senior Saudi security appointments during 2014, and Prince Salman's illness seems unlikely to affect Saudi security. Prince Saud al-Faysal bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud is foreign minister and has played a key role in shaping Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and partnership with the United States for decades. Prince Salman's son, Mohammed bin Salman, is a Minister of State and chief of his father's court, and is reported to play a role in defense policy and the Minister of Defense. King Abdullah's son Prince Mitib bin Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud is now Minister of the National Guard, Prince Muhammed bin Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud is Minister of the Interior, and Prince Khaled bin Bandar bin Abdalaziz Al Saud, the Head of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Presidency. This is a strong and proven national security team, and one that has worked closely with the United States.

It is unclear exactly how the succession will proceed. Some in the Kingdom question Muqrin's leadership role, and his birth. Salman might appoint another Crown Prince if he outlives Abdullah, and if he has the support of other senior members of the royal family. One possible candidate – and yet another member of the key Sudairi clan – Prince Ahmed bin Abd al-Aziz who was born in 1942, and a former Minister of the Interior. He also, however, was a prince that King Abdullah was reported to have fired in 2012, after serving only for a few months as Minister of the Interior and having been seen as an uncertain leader.

At the same time, the Allegiance Council that King Abdullah created to establish a formal body to choose the succession could also play a role, particularly since one of its functions is to replace a king if he becomes ill and unable to perform his duties. Moreover, one needs to remember that

regardless of the formal system, Gulf monarchies are reluctant to replace any living king and Abdullah served as de facto ruler for years during King Fahd's illness and decline.

The key fact, however, is that none of these uncertainties seem likely to present anything like the uncertainties that will come in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Like every nation in the world, the Kingdom faces major internal and outside challenges, has many areas where its future is unpredictable, and always has some form of disastrous worst case as a possible scenario. As succession crises go, however, the choice of next Saudi king is likely to be a non-crisis. The Kingdom has come a long way since the struggle that brought Ibn Saud to power. It is now a modern state by most standards, and its royal politics – while both interesting and uncertain – seem unlikely to be a serious source of instability or lead to serious shifts in its strategic role and partnership with the United States.

*Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.*

**Commentary is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

**© 2015 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.**