Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah died the night of January 23, 2015. The king, who was 91, had ruled the kingdom for two decades. After then-King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995, Abdullah became the country’s de facto ruler, and Abdullah was formally appointed king when his predecessor died in 2005. Ten years later, shrouded in a simple white cloth, King Abdullah was buried in an unmarked grave the same day he died—in line with Wahhabi Islamic teachings. The same day, Abdullah’s half-brother Salman became the new king, and named his own brother, Muqrin, crown prince and his nephew, Muhammad bin Nayef, deputy crown prince. Later that spring, in April, Muqrin was replaced by Muhammad bin Nayef as crown prince. Meanwhile, the king’s young son, Muhammad bin Salman, was appointed new deputy crown prince.

In the wake of Salman’s succession, rumors have flourished about a harrowing power struggle within the Saud family. In the eye of the storm are the two Muhammads—the crown prince known under the acronym “MbN” and the deputy crown prince known as “MbS.” Alarmed by the royal family intrigues—combined with a weakening economy as a result of low oil prices, Sunni and Shia extremism, and regional wars and conflicts—some observers have even warned that we should “start preparing for the collapse of the Saudi kingdom.”¹

Succession is the key challenge to stability in dynastic monarchies, and Saudi Arabia is no exception. Much is at stake during a shift from one ruler to another—power as well as access to enormous wealth—and it requires that the
royal family agrees on one among sometimes many candidates. This kind of collective action tests elite unity, which is an important factor contributing to stability in this type of regime. History is filled with examples of dynastic monarchies that have fallen because of divisions and power struggles within the elite.

If the House of Saud falls, it will have serious implications internally, regionally, and internationally. First, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia would survive a regime collapse. The country has few well-functioning governing institutions beside the royal family; if the regime falls, the country will most likely collapse in the same way as post-Qaddafí Libya. The population will be split on the basis of geographic belonging, as well as tribal-based and sectarian divides. Different groups will fight among themselves for power and resources, especially over the country’s vast oil reserves. Notorious groups like ISIL and al-Qaeda will probably fight for control of Mecca and Medina, Islam’s geo-religious center. Anarchy and civil war will prevail.

Second, collapse in Saudi Arabia will have consequences for the rest of the Middle East. There is a danger that other monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula will be dragged into the undertow, such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In addition, the pressure will increase on regimes that rely on financial support from Saudi Arabia, including those in Egypt and Jordan. Saudi Arabia’s huge stores of modern weapons systems could come into the hands of terrorists—a threat to the entire region.

Third, the House of Saud’s fall would have considerable international repercussions, first of all in terms of exploding oil prices. This could ultimately trigger a new global economic recession. International military interventions to secure the oil fields, and perhaps also the holy cities, cannot be excluded.

This essay addresses the events following the succession of King Salman, and relates these to the larger issue of elite integration, succession, and regime stability in Saudi Arabia. More specifically, it examines what some have interpreted as a divisive power struggle between the king’s son, Muhammad bin Salman, and nephew, Muhammad bin Nayef. Will the royal family stay united in light of future successions to the throne?

**A Look Back**

Unlike the European tradition from the Middle Ages, the Arab–Islamic tradition does not emphasize the principle of primogeniture, whereby power and wealth are
handed down to the first-born son. Sharia law dictates that a man’s sons are all legitimate and have to be treated as equals. Pre-Islamic tribal custom prescribed that power within a family dynasty could not only pass from father to son, but also to the ruler’s brother, uncle, or cousin. The decisive factor was the principle of “the eldest and most able”—a system implying that power should pass to the eldest male relative of the deceased ruler regarded as the most qualified leader. Personal qualities that were particularly highly esteemed in Arab tribal culture were, according to Gary Samuel Samore, an expert on Saudi royal family politics, “success in battle, generosity in victory, and wisdom in mediation.”

The meritocratic idea of choosing the most competent heir intends to avoid hopeless rulers, a precondition for stable and prosperous dynastic rule. While the historical record shows that the principle of primogeniture has often resulted in incompetent leadership, it also shows that there are problems related to the Arab–Islamic traditions of succession: the criteria for identifying the most capable heir have always been very unclear. This problem was made even more acute throughout the Arab-Islamic world as rulers generally left numerous male relatives as a result of polygamous marital customs, and the pool from which to choose the heir was consequently large. Unless a strong ruler had arranged the line of succession before his death, generally by nominating one of his eldest sons the heir apparent, power struggles would often occur. The system’s weakness has caused numerous succession conflicts throughout the history of Arab–Islamic empires and brought many family dynasties to an end.

Although Islamic law dictates that a man’s sons are all legitimate and have to be treated as equals, this was generally not the reality in choosing a successor throughout Arab-Islamic history. Bloodlines have been a decisive element in succession. Traditional Arab tribal societies were obsessed by origin, and still are. At the top of the social hierarchy are descendants of noble tribes. In practice, only those with “blue blood” could inherit power. Choosing the son of a concubine or foreign wife as successor was regarded as a major social taboo. Finally, mothers tended to position their own sons. The sons of women that were among the ruler’s favorites, or mothers equipped with a good nose for politics and the personal skills to manipulate their husband, obviously had a competitive edge. Moreover, full brothers could create strong alliances to outflank their half-brothers. Those possessing many full brothers hence had another advantage.

Historically, the lack of institutional mechanisms to regulate the process of succession has compounded problems. Without an effective state apparatus, it was generally difficult for the designated heir apparent to enforce his claim to power, deter his rivals, and consolidate his position. In pre-modern states,
successors did not have the opportunity to allocate attractive governmental positions as a tool to reward their supporters and buy out their competitors. Nor was there an abundance of economic resources available that one could spend to make compromises. This situation is dramatically different today. Professor Michael Herb at Georgia State University argues that the distribution of positions within the vast state apparatuses to different senior royals as a strategy to fix the issue of succession is the hallmark of the “dynastic monarchies.” In addition, these regimes control enormous oil revenues. Such resources make it much easier for contemporary family dynasties to bargain and make compromises between ambitious royals competing for power and wealth.5

A complete list of examples of Arab–Islamic empires that have experienced serious turmoil, or passed into history, due to succession struggles would be very long: the Prophet Muhammad’s death triggered a crisis of succession that led to the Sunni–Shia rift; the Kharijites, a third major Islamic branch, came about as a result of succession disagreements; and the history of the powerful Muslim family dynasties that followed the first Islamic caliphate is marked by internal intrigues and power struggles including the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Ottomans as just a few examples.

The emirates on the Arabian Peninsula have an identical pattern: while the first Saudi state enjoyed uncontested lineal successions and stability, the second state suffered internal conflicts that ultimately brought it to an end. After the assassination of amir Turki in 1834, the House of Saud devolved into a series of competing factions. The constant infighting ultimately led to the decline of the family and the rise of the rival al-Rashid family. The Al Saud were driven out of Riyadh and forced to take refuge in Kuwait. The Rashidi dynasty in Hail, which rose and fell from 1835 to 1921, is probably the dynasty in Arab recorded history most plagued by succession struggles, blighted by crisis after crisis throughout its rather short existence. The infighting typically centered on whether succession to the position of amir should be horizontal (from brother to brother) or vertical (from father to son). The divisions within the family led to bloody infighting, and in the last years of the nineteenth century as many as six Rashid leaders died violently.6 By 1921, Hail was captured by Ibn Saud and the Rashidi dynasty brought to an end.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Western observers of Saudi politics are obsessed by princes jostling for power and influence. Many claim that the apparent smoothness of succession processes in reality masks fierce intra-family rivalries that often fester for years. The U.S. journalist and author Steve Coll, as an example, writes with reference to royal-family affairs in the mid-1990s: “On November 1995, Fahd suffered a massive stroke … He almost died, but his doctors, so long the beneficiaries of his patronage and largesse, worked to save him. By doing so they inaugurated an Elizabethan-tinged drama of rivalry and
succession manoeuvring within the Saudi royal family.”

Within all families, regardless of size, there are tensions and conflicts from time to time, and the Al Saud family is no exception. There are differences at all levels of the enormous family hierarchy that at times can be very sharp. The princes, like other close relatives, sometimes offend and become angry with one another (generally more related to personal differences or money over politics).

The royal family’s hierarchical power structure, which is typical of Saudi families, is the root of much tension. Jealousy and rivalry among siblings are apparently promoted through the socialization process. Fathers often have their favorite sons, and such favoritism, often highly explicit and manifested for instance in the practice of nicknaming children, causes conflicts between brothers. With the words of a Westerner who spent more than twenty years working closely with the House of Saud: “As the crowd of children grows, the father gets the ‘apple of his eye.’ The chosen one might even be one of the youngest—or the youngest—of the siblings. This often leads to jealousy and conflict. Within such a system, there is a hairline between love and hate.”

Although day-to-day intrigues are at the heart of royal-family politics, it is important not to confuse this dynamic with elite fragmentation. The true unity of the political elite is revealed when it faces challenges that require collective action, such as succession.

From Brother to Brother

So far, succession has occurred in modern Saudi Arabia six times, as six of the sons of Abdulaziz, the modern kingdom’s founder, have followed their father as king: Saud, Faisal, Khalid, Fahd, Abdullah, and Salman. As long as Saudi Arabia has existed, rumors have flourished about power struggles and succession conflicts among the members of the royal family. But such rumors have been largely exaggerated—or untrue—with one exception.

King Abdulaziz, better known as King Ibn Saud in the West (and referred to as such for the remainder of this paper), died November 9, 1953. The same day, some hundred princes gathered around his body and swore allegiance to the heir apparent, Saud, as the new king, and his half-brother, Faisal, as crown prince. The reign of Saud (1953–1964) represents the most politically turbulent period in the history of the kingdom, with fierce infighting between various groups of royals—most important among them, King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal. In the end, the power struggle was solved by the strongest coalition, that of Faisal, outflanking the weaker, that of Saud.

The confrontation between the late King Ibn Saud’s sons took place when the new dynastic state had not yet been secured, and was therefore vulnerable. Ibn Saud had for decades been the undisputed patriarch who disciplined and
knitted together the members of the royal family. But he never institutionalized any mechanisms for an orderly succession. Nor was there established any consensus within the family regarding the legitimate criteria and procedures regulating the transfer of power. Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the conflict broke out.

Arguably, the conflicts nearly brought the young dynasty to an abrupt end. But the conflict taught the royals an important lesson: if they did not stand united, external actors might manipulate divisions to fold the dynasty. The senior princes were all deeply involved in the power struggle between King Saud and heir-apparent Faisal, a struggle that Egypt’s revolutionary president, Gamal Abd al-Nasser, used in the 1950s and ‘60s to play different alliances against each other to undermine the monarchical regime. The senior royals have never forgotten this great embarrassment.

Based on these important lessons, Faisal established when he came to power in 1964 general principles for succession in Saudi Arabia: first, power should pass to the descendants of Ibn Saud, meaning that all branches other than the offspring of the late king were effectively excluded from the line of succession. Second, power should pass horizontally: the king should be chosen from the surviving sons of the monarchy’s founder. In line with this, the greatest sin for a king would be to groom his own sons at the expense of his brothers, as Saud did. Third, the eldest and most able should be king, which in practice meant bypassing some of the elder brothers. Finally, power should be balanced between the different sub-branches belonging to the direct descendants of Ibn Saud, a strategy to avoid one branch of the family becoming too influential. In addition to these principles for choosing a successor, the conflict established the important norm that the king could not rule without the consent of the royal family.

Faisal’s order has been respected until the most recent succession of Salman. The power transitions from Faisal to Khalid in 1975, from Khalid to Fahd in 1982, from Fahd to Abdullah in 2005, and then from Abdullah to Salman in 2015 have not caused any major turbulence within the royal family. This reflects the fact that the sons of Ibn Saud do agree on the general unwritten principles guiding the succession process. The princes that have been bypassed have all acted as responsible stakeholders by accepting the decision of their family. Hence, the princes have avoided internal divisions and destructive conflicts.
Rules of Succession

These principles laid the foundation for a well-regulated succession line. The Saudi succession rules were not formalized, however, until “The Basic Law of Governance,” a constitution-like document adopted by royal decree by then-King Fahd in 1992. This law was a first step to institutionalize something that eventually could be a stable succession system in Saudi Arabia. Article 5 (B) of the document establishes that “Rule passes to the sons of the founding king, Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman al-Faisal Al Saud (Ibn Saud) and to their children’s children.” Further, according to Article 5 (C): “The King chooses the heir apparent and relieves him of his duties by royal order.”

Besides the thirteen surviving sons of the founding king, whom Saudi watchers often refer to as the “second-generation princes,” the law also makes it possible for the 200 or so “third-generation princes” to claim the right to be king.

“The Allegiance Council Law,” adopted by royal decree by then-King Abdullah in 2006, established the Allegiance Council, consisting exclusively of male heirs of King Ibn Saud. Its 34 members include the founding king’s surviving sons, as well as a number of his grandsons. The law prescribes that as soon as the king becomes too ill to do his job, a newly formed medical committee will submit a report to the Allegiance Council on his health. If he is diagnosed as being permanently incapacitated, the crown prince steps in. If the Council finds that both the king and the crown prince are permanently incapable of exercising their powers for health reasons, the Transitory Ruling Council, consisting of five members of the Allegiance Council, will temporarily assume administration of the affairs of state and oversee the country in the interests of the people. Then, within a maximum of one week, the Council members will select by vote a suitable candidate from among the sons or grandsons of King Ibn Saud and call on the one chosen to take over as king. In theory, the law means that the decision to choose future heads of state will no longer be in the hands of one person alone—the king—but a collective of princes.

In addition to these laws, there are informal rules that further reduce the pool of likely heirs to the throne. Within the royal family, the likelihood of a prince reaching the top is determined by factors such as family branch kinship, matrimonial descent, age, personal qualities, and relevant experience.

As successions show, the House of Saud is far more integrated than it is generally given credit for. The formal and informal rules regulating succession have been respected even in situations of trouble, and the family has been able to pass power from one king to another in highly different circumstances including deposition (Saud), assassination (Faisal), and death by old age (Khalid, Fahd, and Abdullah). The general smoothness of these transfers of power shows that the senior princes are able to act as a collective body, which in turn reflects a consensus on the rules of the “political game” on a very fundamental level.
However, events unfolding under the current reign of King Salman—in particular those related to the rise of Muhammad bin Salman, the king’s young son—have arguably put a strain on the unity of the House of Saud.

The Rise of Muhammad bin Salman

On April 29, 2015, the official Saudi Press Agency announced a royal decree stating that the then-55-year-old Muhammad bin Nayef, the nephew of the king and interior minister, had replaced King Salman’s half-brother Muqrin as new heir apparent. Salman relieved Crown Prince Muqrin from his post reportedly “upon his request.”¹¹ This is the first time that a grandson of the founder of the modern kingdom—rather than a son—was appointed crown prince, which marks a generational change at the top of the ruling house. At the same time, Muhammad bin Salman, the then-29-year-old son of King Salman, was appointed deputy crown prince.

It is not surprising that Muqrin was replaced as crown prince—given that he had a weak personal power base and that his mother was a concubine of Yemeni descent. The need for King Abdullah to explicitly stipulate in the decree appointing Muqrin that the decision could not be altered or changed in the future by any party clearly indicates that the late king was aware that the family would resist the appointment of his half-brother. That said, Salman’s prompt decision to sideline Muqrin challenged established norms within the royal house: It is neither common that a new king sets aside the heir apparent appointed by his predecessor, nor that he overrules a royal decree issued by the late king.

Similarly, it did not come as a surprise that Muhammad bin Nayef was promoted to crown prince. He is one of the seniors among Ibn Saud’s grandsons, and has a reputation as a skilled leader. In Saudi Arabia, MbN is known as the one who secured the kingdom by defeating the local branch of al-Qaeda—which nearly cost him his life. This has made him highly respected both within his own family and within the diplomatic community in Riyadh.

However, what did come as a surprise was the appointment of the young Wunder Prince Muhammad bin Salman as deputy crown prince. The prince—whose age at that time seemed to be a well-protected state secret—had few merits to him. Prior to his promotion, MbS had limited experience from top positions and held a modest bachelor degree in law from King Saud University.¹² More importantly, however, his mother and the king’s third wife, Princess Fahda al-Hithlain, has actively pushed his cause. The King is said to be in love with her, and he apparently has a very high opinion of their son. From an early age, Princess Fahda made sure that the young prince attended his father’s meetings and other activities while he served as governor of Riyadh.¹³
The appointment of Muhammad bin Salman as deputy crown prince underlined that King Salman had great political ambitions for his son. On January 23, 2015, the day King Abdullah died and Salman took the throne, he appointed Mohammad bin Salman the youngest minister of defense in the world. He also named him as the secretary general of the Royal Court. Moreover, on January 29, MbS was named the chair of the then-newly established Council for Economic and Development Affairs, replacing the disbanded Supreme Economic Commission. This new committee is the kingdom’s main economic policymaking agency, including 22 key ministers.

The first major event in Muhammad bin Salman’s tenure as defense minister was “Operation Decisive Storm,” a Saudi Arabian-led military intervention initiated on April 21, 2015, against the Houthi rebels and their allies in Yemen. Through this operation, King Salman arguably hoped to make his young son respected among all members of the royal family, allowing him to stand on equal footing with older and by far more qualified cousins such as Muhammad bin Nayef, crown prince and interior minister, and Mitab bin Abdullah, commander of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG).14 According to sources near Salman, the king hoped that his son would be the first Saudi prince to enter Sanaa as a conqueror. Possibly misled by his advisors, the king was apparently confident that the Houthi rebels and their allies would not be able to withstand the Saudi-led bombardments for long and that the Yemeni capital could easily be retaken.15 Government-controlled Saudi media immediately started presenting the young prince as the “commander in chief,” who decisively led the attacks on the neighboring country to the south. The media published numerous photos of him directing the war from his office, visiting soldiers on the battlefield, and sitting in the cockpit of a fighter jet.

Following the appointments of MbN and MbS, many observers were of the opinion that King Salman had in mind a “mentor model” where the experienced crown price would mentor and guide the king’s young and inexperienced son. Soon, however, it became clear that the relationship between the two cousins would go in another direction.

It is plausible to assume that Muhammad bin Nayef felt trapped between a rock and a hard place—between the king and the king’s ambitious son. By virtue of being interior minister, MbN has responsibility for security within the kingdom. In the aftermath of the suicide attack at a mosque in Abha in the Asir Province on August 6, 2015—in which fifteen soldiers linked to an anti-terrorism unit were killed—Muhammad bin Salman is said to have criticized in the presence of other royals his older cousin’s plan to combat terrorism.16 This was
unprecedented: in Saudi Arabia it is taboo for a junior to criticize a senior. Muhammad bin Salman apparently also criticized his cousin for the hajj stampede on September 24 in Mina, which according to some press reports caused the deaths of at least 2,400 pilgrims. Two weeks earlier, just before the hajj, 87 people were killed in another accident when a crane collapsed over the Grand Mosque in Mecca. As interior minister and head of the Hajj Committee, Muhammad bin Nayef has the formal responsibility for the safety of pilgrims visiting the holy cities.

Furthermore, it seems that Muhammad bin Nayef and his Council for Political and Security Affairs—the other new council established by King Salman in January 2015 and chaired by the crown prince—were sidelined in issues related to the troublesome neighbors Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. King Salman allegedly placed all counter-terror strategies of the Ministry of Interior under the supervision of his son’s Ministry of Defense. In addition, he initiated the establishment of a Muslim military alliance “against terrorism,” also coordinated by his son’s ministry. According to sources in Riyadh, neither Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef nor some of the 34 member countries—including Saudi Arabia’s traditionally close partner, Pakistan—knew about the plans for this alliance before they read about its establishment in the newspapers in mid-December 2015.

In addition, the king’s son gained some influence over the religious establishment, again at the expense of Muhammad bin Nayef. King Salman reportedly instructed the head of the royal court, Khaled bin Abdulrahman al-Issa, to refer all requests for grants from the religious establishment to his son, giving him a good starting point to build support among the clergy.

Another senior prince who most likely felt pressure from the rising MbS was SANG Commander Mitab bin Abdullah—son of late King Abdullah. SANG is a critical pillar of the House of Saud, and has for decades been the power base of the Abdullah branch of the royal house. In 1962, Prince Abdullah—who would later become king—was appointed commander of the guard. Traditionally, to ensure its loyalty, the guardsmen have been recruited from a few undoubtedly loyal tribes, including al-Tuwajri, al-Ghamdi, al-Zahrani, and al-Nahedh. Today, SANG’s main task is to defend the royal house. In addition, the guard is responsible for safeguarding Mecca, Medina, and the country’s oil and gas infrastructure; the task of protecting the holy places and the energy sector—another two key pillars of the state construction—gives the guard great prestige. In terms of number of men, the SANG and the regular army are of approximately equal strength: the guard has a standing force of 100,000 men, in addition to a tribal militia of 25,000 men. While SANG deals with internal threats, the army is responsible for handling external threats.

From the start of the military operation in Yemen, there were indications that King Salman sought to reduce the power of the SANG and hence weaken the position of Mitab bin Abdullah, a political rival to his son. As a consequence of the war in Yemen, SANG Commander Mitab had to follow instructions from Defense
Minister Muhammad bin Salman, who coordinated the military intervention in the neighboring country. SANG units deployed along the border in the south began to receive their orders directly from the Saudi army. This was the first time in history the guard received direct orders from the army, without these going through SANG’s top staff. Moreover, King Salman instructed the head of his court, to refer all requests from SANG about additional funding related to the ongoing military operation in Yemen directly to MbS, seen as another move to undermine the guard’s position. It was even rumored that the king planned to subordinate the SANG to the defense ministry, which would strip the guard of its status as a ministry and Mitab bin Abdullah’s rank as minister.22

If Salman actually had ordered such a radical reorganization, he would have altered the balance of power within his own family and broken with an important norm: the control over the armed forces shall never be concentrated in a single branch of the ruling house. Mitab bin Abdullah apparently felt the pressure, since he reportedly promised his most important allies within SANG that he would always stand by their side and protect them against the king’s ambitious son. In meetings with prominent members of tribal families—which for decades were deeply loyal to the late King Abdullah—he assured that he would never abandon them and would personally defend their interests at any cost. In turn, the family elders swore allegiance to Prince Mitab, and pledged to stand by his side.23

Underlining his prominent position, on January 4, 2016, Mohammad bin Salman gave his first on-the-record interview while talking to The Economist.24 In it, Prince Muhammad unveiled his plans for transforming the Saudi economy through new taxes, mass privatization, and the sale of national assets—a plan reportedly developed with help from the multinational consulting firm McKinsey & Company. Besides his radical message, the prince’s style raised a few eyebrows among readers. In a comment to the interview, The Economist noted: “He speaks in the first person, as if he were already king even though he is only second in line. Over five hours, King Salman was mentioned once; his cousin Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef does not figure at all, though he is in charge of internal security and may be biding his time.”25

In the wake of the interview in January, rumors also began circulating in Riyadh about King Salman’s plan to step down in favor of his son Muhammad bin Salman. According to these rumors, the king was seeking support among his brothers for this move, which would also remove Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. Moreover, if we are to believe the rumors, the king wanted to change the succession from horizontal lines (transfer of power between brothers) to a vertical order (wherein the king hands power to his most eligible son). This would secure the
line of Salman: while Muhammad bin Nayef has two daughters and no sons, Muhammad bin Salman has two daughters and two sons, Salman and Mashoor. The king apparently argued that such a change would secure the kingdom’s long-term stability, and he referred to Jordan that it change its succession system in this way a few years ago.26

If King Salman were to abdicate, he would be the first Saudi king who willingly stepped down. (Qatar’s former ruler, shaykh Hamid, made a similar move, abdicating and installing his own son Tamim bin Hamid as amir in 2013. As Tamim was son of the amir’s favorite wife, the influential and glamorous sheikha Mozah, the young prince’s rise to the top hardly came as a surprise to observers of Qatari royal family politics.) Whether Salman in fact plans to abdicate, installing his son as king, is not clear. It cannot be ruled out that he wants to secure the political future of his son while still alive, as most sons of former Saudi kings have been marginalized and driven out of power after the death of their fathers.

The third week of January 2016 was a highly important week for Saudi diplomacy, and Muhammad bin Nayef’s absence in these affairs raised eyebrows within the diplomatic community in Riyadh—fuelling speculation that the crown prince soon would be replaced.27 While representatives of the world’s great powers held important meetings in Saudi Arabia, Muhammad bin Nayef was reportedly hunting falcons in Algeria. On January 19, King Salman and his son, the Deputy Crown Prince, welcomed the Chinese leader. Rumors say that the Chinese delegation was unhappy with the visit, as a scheduled meeting between Xi Jingping’ and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef was cancelled. Concerned about terrorist groups in the region, the Chinese president had planned to hold a meeting with the Saudi crown prince—who is also in charge of the country’s domestic security as interior minister.28 Similarly, on January 23, King Salman and his son held meetings with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. As Syria was on the agenda, the U.S. delegation was highly surprised by the absence of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef.29 Indeed, Muhammad bin Nayef held a very low international profile the first year of Salman’s reign, while Mohammed bin Salman visited Russia, France, Egypt, Jordan, the United States, and the NATO headquarters in Brussels.

The Backlash

The rapid—and somewhat unexpected—rise of MbS triggered discomfort within the House of Saud. September 2015 saw the first signs of a mounting campaign by some of the princes of the royal family to defenestrate the current ruler. A senior member of the royal family—reportedly a grandson of the kingdom’s founding father, Ibn Saud—circulated a series of open letters that expressed fears that the monarchy would collapse if King Salman, along with Crown Prince Muhammad
bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, was not promptly deposed. “The king is not in a stable condition and in reality the son of the king [Muhammad bin Salman] is ruling the kingdom,” the author argued.30

Moreover, the author criticized the “ruling clique” for mismanaging the economy in the context of plummeting oil prices, for mishandling the hajj tragedy, as well as for what he called military adventurism in Syria and in particular Yemen, causing a doubling of state spending. In the letters, the author further advocated that power in the kingdom had to be returned to older princes with more experience: “We have neglected the marginalization of the elderly and those who carry experience and surrendered the leadership to the new generation of foolish dreamers who act behind the scenes to an unfit king.” Consequently, the angry author called on the twelve surviving sons of Ibn Saud (besides King Salman)—specifically the princes Talal, Turki, and Ahmed bin Abdulaziz—to unite and remove the leadership in a palace coup, before choosing a new government from within the royal family. “Allow the oldest and most capable to take over the affairs of the state, let the new king and crown prince take allegiance from all, and cancel the strange, new rank of second deputy premier,” the author stated.

Muhammad bin Salman—in the letters as well as by some of his relatives privately referred to as “the boy” or “the teenager”—was at the center of the criticism, accused for being overly ambitious, arrogant, and reckless. He was particularly criticized for his role in leading Saudi Arabia’s troublesome war in neighboring Yemen, for lacking a proper military strategy and an exit plan. Indeed, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen has received widespread criticism both from the international community and to a certain degree within the kingdom, leading to what UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien has referred to as a “humanitarian catastrophe” in the poor country.31 Such criticism echoes a leaked one-and-a-half-page memo in which Germany’s intelligence agency (BND) accused Muhammad bin Salman of being a political gambler who destabilized the Middle East through “an impulsive policy of intervention.”32

Four of the 34 members of the Allegiance Council had originally voted against the appointment of the young prince as deputy crown prince in April 2015, while two refrained from voting.33 It is important to note that some of the four voting against Muhammad bin Salman apparently were members of the so-called Sudayri branch—a powerful alliance within the royal family of seven full brothers whose mother was Hassa bint Ahmed Al Sudayri, the favorite wife of the modern Saudi Arabia’s founder, King Ibn Saud—to which King Salman, Crown Prince

The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen has received widespread criticism from in and outside the Kingdom.
Muhammad bin Nayef, and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman all belong. This fact undermines the argument promoted by some Saudi observers—including me initially—that Salman's appointments were a “palace coup organized by the Sudayri clan.” Prince Ahmad, who is the king's brother and another prominent Sudayri, is said to be among Muhammad bin Salman’ harshest critics, albeit in private. Muhammad bin Salman is even said to have a poor relationship with his older half-brothers, including Sultan, Faisal, and Abdulaziz, who are all older, better educated, and more experienced.

By appointing his son Muhammad bin Salman to a wide range of key positions—deputy crown prince, second deputy prime minister, defense minister, secretary general of the Royal Court, and chair of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs—King Salman triggered a deep sense of discontent within the royal family. Muhammad bin Salman was given power over the whole state apparatus, with two exceptions: The Ministry of Interior, controlled by Muhammad bin Nayef, and the SANG, controlled by Mitab bin Abdullah. There were indications that the king tried to undermine these two powerful rivals to his son, but this was not well received by the family.

Although Muhammad bin Nayef was also criticized in the letters circulated in the autumn of 2015, he is in general respected among his relatives. Unlike the disapproval of Muhammad bin Salman’s appointment as deputy crown prince by some members of the Allegiance Council, the appointment of Muhammad bin Nayef as crown prince was unanimously approved. Likewise, Mitab bin Abdullah has broad support as commander of the SANG.

Within the family, more and more princes have come to believe that the king’s ultimate goal is to consolidate the succession for his favorite son, Muhammad bin Salman. By giving him so much power, the king bypassed many much older and far more experienced princes. Among the senior royals, probably few agreed with King Salman that talent—to the extent that the king’s son in fact is such a unique talent—was more important than experience when it came to steering the family business of Saudi Arabia.

In the early spring of 2016, it seemed like opposition to King Salman and his son had grown strong. Opposition pressured King Salman to limit the influence of his son, and return powers to Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef.
Pressured by his family, King Salman seems to have intervened and adjusted the relationship between the two Muhammads. In early March 2016, according to one usually reliable source close to the royal court, Salman held a meeting with his nephew and his son. The king allegedly used this meeting to discuss the personal relationship between the two—and presented them with his expectations for how they should cooperate with each other by virtue of their key positions and in various questions they were set to handle. King Salman's aim was to establish a functioning partnership between the two cousins—and the two promised the king that they would share power now and in the future. Such promises are typically circulated among the senior members of the royal family (for instance to the members of the Allegiance Council that represent the major family branches) in order to make them more binding.

In the meeting, according to the source, Muhammad bin Salman promised his father always to be present in the meetings of the Council for Political and Security Affairs, which is chaired by Muhammad bin Nayef, and always to inform his cousin about the agenda in advance of meetings of his Council for Economic and Development Affairs. In addition, he promised to inform the crown prince on his strategic military plans. Muhammad bin Nayef vowed, for his part, that he was going to do his best to support the king's son in matters related to the development of the Saudi economy and military capabilities.

Furthermore, it is likely that the king assured Muhammad bin Nayef that by virtue of being interior minister, he still retained the overall responsibility for the security within the kingdom. For Saudi Arabia, it is critically important that the responsibility for this important task is not diffused as a result of power struggles at the top of the royal family, given that the kingdom currently is engaged in a protracted war in Yemen and must deal with two dangerous domestic threats: Sunni extremism (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, and ISIL) and Shia activism. King Salman is said to have underlined that he aimed at a good working relationship with Muhammad bin Nayef, and that he wanted to consult him by virtue of being crown prince in all important matters.

While the king's son subsequently held a lower profile for a few weeks, the crown prince was given a more prominent and visible role in the wake of the meeting. King Salman used the high profile state visit to Paris on March 6, 2016, to underline the crown prince's important role. Ahead of the meeting between Muhammad bin Nayef and President François Hollande—according to a well-connected observer of Saudi Arabia—the Saudi government requested France's highest order for military and civil merits to Crown Prince Muhammad in order to "strengthen his international stature." President Hollande's office accepted the rather unorthodox request from the Saudis, and Mohammed bin Nayef was awarded the prestigious Légion d'honneur "for his efforts in the region and around the world to combat extremism and terrorism."
Lessons Learned

Developments under the reign of King Salman offer two lessons about elite politics in Saudi Arabia. The first is that a Saudi king does not have absolute power. The ruler is not free to make any decisions he wants regarding the kingdom’s future; he needs to consult and build support among the most important members and factions within the royal family. Succession is truly a family affair; no actors outside the family, including non-royal elites or external powers, have ever solely decided the outcome of this process. The role of prominent members of the religious establishment and the heads of the main tribes is limited to obediently swearing allegiance (baya) to the new ruler—an important symbolic ritual intended to give the dynastic monarchy and the ruler legitimacy. Within the diplomatic community in Riyadh, there is a perception that Muhammad bin Nayef is “Washington’s man” and the United States’ preferred future king. However, it is unlikely that this will affect his chances of reaching the top. If the king was to ensure his son Salman became the future king, he would first have to build an alliance within the family that was stronger than any other imaginable alliance combinations. Neither the surviving “second-generation princes” (the king’s brothers) nor the most important “third generation princes” (among them most importantly Muhammad bin Nayef and Mitab bin Abdullah) seem to have put their support behind the king’s young son.

The second lesson is strong norms and rules that regulate elite politics still exist in Saudi Arabia, and if any member of the royal family violates these—including the king—there will be consequences. Through the positioning of his own son, King Salman violated a number of key norms. This has happened before: in 1964, King Saud was deposed by his own brothers among others because he sought to amass power in his own and his sons’ hands at the expense of other members of the royal family. Later kings have also positioned their own sons in terms of power and wealth, but within reasonable limits. Age, experience, and kingly qualities have always been the basis for the choice of an heir to the throne, and, arguably, the 30-year-old and inexperienced Muhammad bin Salman hardly has any of these qualities yet. According to “The Basic Law of Governance,” each of the late Ibn Saud’s sons and grandsons have the right to be king. By grooming his own son, Salman bypassed numerous other princes with stronger claims to the throne, while the young Muhammad bin Salman obviously created tensions by acting as if he was the heir apparent.
The irony is that the one who violated these norms and provoked the family’s anger was King Salman himself. For many decades, he was the one known for building consensus within the House of Saud, by virtue of his position as governor of Riyadh as well as his personal qualities. It was typically him the royals turned to when they needed to sort out family conflicts or other family matters. In this respect, there are good reasons to ask why Salman would groom his son so aggressively, ultimately risking the stability of his own kingdom. As a long-term observer of royal family politics in Riyadh asks, “How could the king believe that the 30-year-old ‘kid’ could be the patriarchal figurehead the Saudi society needs?” The answer is probably very simple: the story of a king blinded by his favoritism—making stupid decisions and bringing the kingdom to an end—is as old as humanity itself.

**After King Salman**

Any observer of royal family politics in Saudi Arabia ought to read the lyrics of Bob Dylan: “And don’t speak too soon/For the wheel’s still in spin/And there’s no tellin’ who/That it’s naming/For the loser now/Will be later to win.” Recent history shows that one should beware of predictions about the succession in Saudi Arabia, but it seems likely that a generational change will take place in the royal family after Salman. Among the surviving “second-generation princes,” the 75-year-old Prince Ahmad could still be a candidate. However, changing the entire line of succession as it is today would only happen if a coup takes place within the royal family.

Moreover, it seems that King Salman for the moment is not strong enough to secure his son, Muhammad bin Salman, as the future king. The king did not get the support from the family elders, and his project appears to have backfired. In this light, Muhammad bin Nayef is still the likely next king of Saudi Arabia. He has broad support within the royal family, and it is an advantage that he himself does not have any sons, which reduces the risk of him sometime in the future seeking to secure his own lineage by establishing a vertical succession system. The best Salman and his son can hope for is probably that Muhammad bin Nayef does not change the current succession line; but they have no guarantee of this. The removal of Crown Prince Muqrin—who had neither the king’s favor nor a strong personal power base—showed that the position is far from secure, and without his father’s protection, Muhammad bin Salman could see a similar fate.

Arguably, by so aggressively positioning his son, King Salman may have undermined his son in the long run by giving him control over too many areas of policy—economy, oil, defense, etc. Muhammad bin Salman was particularly damaged by the war in Yemen, and he is hardly respected within the royal family. As one
observer puts it, “he [Muhammad bin Salman] can never be the ‘warrior king’; instead he is the one who lost the war [in Yemen].” The popular perception is that the king’s son is no military man—unlike Muhammad bin Nayef and Mitab bin Abdullah. An increasing number of Saudis are criticizing the war. Both royals and ordinary people feel that money is being wasted in a war without end, while the government is pouring money into Egypt and even talking about sending troops to Syria.

In the late spring of 2016, MbS was rebranded: He was no longer “commander in chief,” but rather the man responsible for transforming the Saudi economy and bringing the kingdom out of the oil era. On April 25, the Saudi government announced the grandiose “Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030,” the brainchild of Muhammad bin Salman, aimed at diversifying, privatizing, and modernizing the economy. The Saudi economy is arguably in need for reform. However, like the war in Yemen, it is a project fraught with risk for the king and his son.

Moreover, Muhammad bin Salman seems completely alone. With the exception of his father, it is difficult to identify his allies and supporters within the royal family. Although the king’s young, charismatic, and dynamic son still enjoys a “pop-star status” among segments of the younger population, so long as power in Saudi Arabia does not rest on popular elections his political future depends on the support among the royal elite. Observers claim that Muhammad bin Salman’s advisors generally are his father’s advisors. Prince Muhammad seems to be surrounded mostly by non-royal advisors (such as Dr. Hisham Al Shaykh, Fahd bin Muhammad al-Issa, and Muhammad Eyad Kayali) as well as foreign consultants (among others, McKinsey & Company and Boston Consulting Group). No senior royals have taken the king’s young prince under their wings. If Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef was intended to play the role as mentor, it has for obvious reasons never been the case.

With regard to Mitab bin Abdullah, it is likely that he in the future will play the important role of a “kingmaker.” This is a person or group that has great influence in a royal succession, without being a viable candidate. In the case of Saudi Arabia, a kingmaker is a person or group within the House of Saud, since succession is purely a family affair and outside actors have little influence. The powerful Prince Mohammed, who died in 1988, was known as “the kingmaker” because he twice appeared to have passed up the throne in favor of two of his younger half-brothers, King Faisal (1964–1975) and King Khalid (1975–1982). It cannot be ruled out that Mitab bin Abdullah, who is older than his cousin Muhammad bin Nayef, will help to ensure that the latter becomes king. It is
known that in the last few months there has been a rapprochement between the two cousins, and an alliance of the two will be very strong by virtue of their control of the Ministry of Interior and the National Guard respectively. In return, Muhammad bin Nayef could secure Mitab bin Abdullah’s position as commander of the SANG.

Under the reign of the late King Ibn Saud’s sons, the “second-generation princes,” the royal family has remained intact, despite internal disputes. It is an open question whether the “third-generation princes” share the older generation’s norms of political behavior, agree on legitimate decision-making processes, and understand the importance of closing their ranks. Compared to their fathers, the third-generation princes are more in number, less close, and therefore might find it much more difficult to stay united. The major concern is that Ibn Saud’s many grandsons might prove unable to forge an orderly succession. There might still be some truth in the old Arab proverb: “I against my brothers; I and my brothers against my cousins; I and my brothers and my cousins against the world.”

As long as the rules governing elite politics in Saudi Arabia are respected, this will arguably stabilize the political system and help ensure the survival of the dynastic monarchy. However, this set of rules is still largely not formalized. In this respect, it will be crucial that senior princes belonging to the next generation take responsibility when they take power—and that they guard these rules. United they stand, united they fall.

Notes


20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.


43. See Stenslie, Regime Stability, op. cit., pp. 94–95.

44. Anonymous interviews in London, United Kingdom, March 2016.

45. Ibid.
