Saudi Arabia's Game of Thrones: King Salman Amasses Power

By F. Gregory Gause, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, Feb. 2, 2015

In just over ten days of rule, Saudi Arabia’s King Salman has moved swiftly to consolidate power. In doing so, he has raised the profile of two of the royal family’s so-called third-generation princes—Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, the deputy crown prince and minister of the interior, and Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the king’s young son, who is now defense minister and chief of the royal court—and sidelined a number of their cousins. In a family where, for decades, political power has been dispersed among several members, the centralization of power is certain to raise eyebrows. It also raises questions about how the Saudi-American relationship, which has weathered numerous contemporary crises (9/11, the Iraq War, the Arab Spring), is going to be managed under the new ruler.

SIBLING SHUFFLE

Since the reign of King Faisal (1964–1975), effective decision-making power in Saudi Arabia has been shared by a group of half-brothers who backed Faisal in his struggle for power against his older brother, King Saud (1953–1964). This “party of Faisal” has supplied the country’s kings ever since: Khalid (1975–82), Fahd (1982–2005), Abdullah (2005–15), and now Salman. The party of Faisal also controlled important posts, such as the Defense Ministry, under Prince Sultan, and the Ministry of the Interior, under Prince Nayef. (Both men died before they got their chance at the top spot.) The king, of course, was primus inter pares among the half-brothers, but the rest of the group members still had vast power through their control of important bureaucratic positions and through an utterly opaque but ultimately effective decision-making process.

But the party of Faisal is over. Salman is its last member; his crown prince, Muqrin, was too young to be involved in the political machinations that brought the party to power in the 1960s. With the passing of a generation, Salman was thus confronted with the opportunity to restructure his country’s decision-making process. And rather than re-create the old collective decision-making system among the next generation of prominent princes, in his royal decrees of January 29, he centralized power in the hands of just two members of that generation.

One of the new strongmen is not a surprise. Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, 55 years old, has been Minister of the Interior (in essence, the country’s chief of police) since the death of his father, in 2012. Before that, he was the deputy minister, responsible for the country’s counterterrorism strategy in the mid-2000s. He earned a reputation as an efficient manager and an effective strategist, but also as an opponent of political dissent. He has presided over a crackdown on political activists of both Islamist and more liberal inclinations since the Arab Spring. He became the point man for intelligence-sharing on terrorism with the United States and is held in high regard in Washington.

It was thus not shocking when Salman tapped Muhammad bin Nayef to be deputy crown prince, establishing him as the front-runner to be the first king of his generation. Although that position is no guarantee of the throne—Salman could remove him from it, as could Muqrin, when and if he becomes king—it does make him the presumptive heir after Muqrin. If all proceeds according
to pattern, Mohammad bin Nayef’s accession to the kingship will solve the vexing problem of how to pass rulership to the next generation. The king also named Muhammad bin Nayef as head of the newly established political and security affairs committee, one of the two overarching policy coordination committees that Salman set up to run the policy process.

The new ruler’s second strongman is much more surprising, and, in many ways, more troubling. Salman has given his son Muhammad bin Salman an enormous amount of power. This Prince Muhammad, at 34, is significantly younger than his cousin Muhammad bin Nayef. Unlike most of the prominent Al Saud family members of his generation, he did no schooling abroad. He has never had a significant government job. He was the head of his father’s office when Salman served as crown prince, and now the young and untested prince has three major positions. He is minister of defense, presiding over the Saudi armed forces and administering one of the largest budgets in the kingdom. He is chief of the royal court, the equivalent of the White House chief of staff. He will be the gatekeeper, deciding on who sees his father and who does not. And he is also head of the economic and development committee, which will coordinate the kingdom’s economic policy.

By empowering Muhammad bin Salman and Muhammad bin Nayef, Salman has cut out many other princes. In the royal decrees of January 29, two of the deceased King Abdullah’s sons were removed from important governorships in Riyadh and Mecca. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, long-time Saudi ambassador in Washington and general foreign policy fixer for the regime, saw the national security council, which he headed, disbanded. Prince Bandar bin Khalid, head of foreign intelligence, was replaced by a commoner. Prince Khalid Al Faisal, oldest son of the deceased King Faisal, was removed from the Ministry of Education and returned to his previous position as governor of Mecca. This is not exactly a demotion, but it does remove him from the capital. Other formerly prominent members of this generation of the family had been sidelined earlier by Abdullah, including Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, son of the former king and former governor of the Eastern Province (where the oil is), and Prince Khalid bin Sultan, son of the former Defense Minister and a former deputy minister of defense himself, best known in the West as the commander of the Saudi forces in the Gulf War.

Some prominent princes of this generation have kept their portfolios in the big change. Prince Mit’ab bin Abdullah, son of the late king and commander of the National Guard, keeps that command and the cabinet position that goes with it. Prince Saud Al Faisal, who has served as the kingdom’s foreign minister since 1975, also kept his position. (Prince Saud, who has suffered from persistent health problems, was in the United States for an operation during the power transition.) Salman’s house cleaning was thus not absolute, but it is hard to draw any conclusion except that he is concentrating governing power among a smaller set of family members than at any time in recent Saudi history.

Given how closely to the vest the Al Saud family plays its cards when it comes to its own internal politics, it is difficult to know how these changes are going over among any Saudi king’s first constituency, his extended family. The royal decree announcing Muhammad bin Nayef as deputy crown prince indicated that the appointment was approved by “a majority” of the Allegiance Council, the family council that Abdullah had set up to try to institutionalize succession issues. One wonders how large the majority was. At least Muhammad bin Nayef is a
proven commodity. Yet in a family where seniority has enormous meaning, where princes at public occasions automatically line up by age, it is hard to reckon how the vaulting of a 34-year-old to power over so many of his cousins (and brothers) will go down. When Salman starts denying older cousins access to the king, which will be his job as chief of the royal court, observers might hear more.

UNITED STATE OF WORRY

For the United States, the most immediate issue during the transition is military-to-military cooperation. (Intelligence cooperation, another pillar of the relationship, has been managed in recent years by Muhammad bin Nayef, so that should proceed without change.) As defense minister, Muhammad bin Salman will now be the point person in that area. His views on a range of issues involved in Saudi-American relations are not publicly known. Given the centrality in the relationship of military-to-military cooperation, his appointment raises questions about the day-to-day operation of this element of bilateral ties. The new minister is not going to radically alter the decades-long Saudi-American partnership. Close relations with the United States is part of the policy consensus that united the party of Faisal” over the decades, and Salman was part of that consensus. But the extent and depth of cooperation will hinge on how his son manages his ministry and the relationship with Washington.

Likewise, the general outlines of Saudi policy on a number of other important issues are unlikely to change. The reappointment of important technocratic ministers—Minister of Oil Ali Naimi and Minister of Finance Ibrahim al-Assaf—signals continuity. Minister of Labor Adel al-Fakih, who has presided over an aggressive effort to increase the number of Saudis employed in the private sector, ruffling a number of feathers in the Saudi business community, was also kept on. Even so, it is a mug’s game to try to predict the long-term policy orientation of the new Saudi king. The conventional wisdom about Abdullah before he took power was that he was a tribal, socially conservative, and anti-American Arab nationalist. Maybe he was in his heart of hearts, but that is not the way he governed. We have little sense of what Salman’s long-term goals are, or if he has any yet. His first appointments, however, do give a few indications of where he might be leaning. He has appointed three members of the Al al-Shaykh family to his new cabinet. This family descends from Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the religious zealot and founder of Wahhabism, with whom Muhammad bin Saud made the fateful alliance in 1744 that propelled the Al Saud family to power in Arabia. Members of the family, by now as varied and extensive as the Al Saud themselves, are not all cut from the zealous mold of their ancestor. But they do represent the continuing Saudi adherence to the conservative and xenophobic interpretation of Islam that is the state religion of Saudi Arabia. One member of the family who lost his job was Abd al-Latif Al al-Shaykh, the head of the infamous religious police, who was considered something of a liberal and had endeavored to limit the excesses of his force.

Further, with oil prices having fallen by more than 50 percent since the middle of 2014, one might have expected Salman to lean toward fiscal restraint in his first decrees. One would be wrong. He granted Saudis working in the public sector (and the vast majority of Saudis in the workforce work for the state) and retirees from state jobs two months’ salary as a bonus upon his accession to the throne, costing nearly $30 billion. Saudi Arabia has plenty of money in the bank,
nearly $750 billion in reserves, so there is still a good-sized fiscal cushion. But, if oil prices stay at their comparatively low level for some time, a king who clearly would like to establish a reputation for beneficence will have to confront some hard choices about government spending.

THE STORM AHEAD?

In an immediate sense, the transition from Abdullah to Salman has been very smooth. There is absolutely no reason to doubt the stability of the Saudi state in the near future. It weathered the upheavals of the Arab Spring. It has the financial reserves to sustain its patronage system for some years. The major sectors of society that might theoretically coalesce against the regime to pressure it for political change—conservative Wahhabis, the Shia minority, more liberal and technocratic elites—fear each other more than they oppose the regime. There is no near-term prospect for a serious political eruption from below.

But regimes do not only face challenges from below. They can also come to crisis if they split from within. Al Saud family discipline has been nearly absolute in the last 50 years, but in the longer history of its rule there have been numerous occasions when internal family fights have imperiled, and even brought down, Saudi rule in Arabia. Salman’s concentration of power in a very few family hands runs the longer-term risk of a backlash among the many members of the third generation who have seemingly been cut out of power by his recent decisions. For the first time in decades, the stage may be set for a real political fight within the ruling family. It will be a test of the political skill of the new king, his deputy crown prince, and, particularly, his young son, in whom he has invested so much power, to avoid that dangerous outcome.