Viewpoints
No. 68

Saudi King Abdullah: An Assessment

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King Abdullah, who died January 23 after a 10-year-long reign, was truly beloved by his people and the most highly respected leader of the Arab world. He started out as a reformer, propelling women into the all-male world of Saudi politics and sending over 100,000 Saudis abroad for higher education in hopes of speeding up the modernization of his ultra-conservative kingdom. But the Arab Spring brought an abrupt halt to the reform process and triggered a severe crackdown on all human and political rights activists.

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King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia was widely beloved at home and ranked toward the end of his life as the Arab world's most respected leader. He will be remembered in Saudi history particularly for his promotion of Saudi women into politics and for sending tens of thousands of Saudi students to the United States and Europe to modernize his challenged kingdom.

Only time will tell whether he moved too slowly in his reforms to save the ruling House of Saud from the hurricane winds of change sweeping the Arab world since the 2011 Arab Spring. But there is no denying his early efforts to rejuvenate a monarchy stuck in an ultraconservative Islamic straight jacket and led by geriatric rulers now dying off at an alarming rate.

Abdullah himself was officially 90 though some scholars put his age at 92 or even older. The new king, Prince Salman, 79, is also afflicted by health problems making another early turnover in Saudi leadership highly likely.

Abdullah was so concerned about a struggle over royal succession that last March he took the unprecedented step of naming a deputy crown prince, a privilege normally left to the incoming king. He chose his half-brother, Prince Muqrin, 69, his former intelligence chief and the youngest son of the kingdom's founding father, King Abdulaziz al-Saud. His choice makes it unlikely that anyone from the younger generation of grandsons will reach the kingship anytime soon.

Abdullah's reign was not without paradoxes. It began in August 2005 with a sympathetic ear to liberal demands for an acceleration of political reforms. After the pro-democracy uprisings across the Arab world in 2011, however, he abruptly changed course to stifle all debate and dissent within the kingdom. At the time of his death, university-educated Saudi women were still forbidden to drive cars. Elections for a consultative Shura Council, common in other Arab Gulf monarchies, had yet even to be mooted. At the same time, his government was carrying out a major crackdown to silence political and human rights advocates demanding these and other reforms.

Another paradox was his promotion of inter-faith dialogue. He organized various international conferences to promote better understanding among the world's religions and established the King Abdullah International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Vienna, Austria. At home, however, relations between the kingdom's majority Sunni population and minority Shia took a turn for the worse, partly because of anti-Shia propaganda from state-supported Saudi clerics.

Abdullah at once detested the Arab Spring and used its uprisings to get even with his enemies. He bemoaned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's downfall in February 2011, denouncing President Obama for abandoning him. But he led the campaign in the Arab world for a UN-backed and NATO-enforced no-fly zone over Libya that forced Muammar Qaddafi from power. The king then rallied the Arab League to launch a campaign to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, calling openly for arming the Free Syrian Army to achieve this goal.

Despite these paradoxes, history may well assess Abdullah to have been the most popular and politically astute of the five sons of King Abdulaziz to have ruled the kingdom since his death in 1953. He was also an acknowledged major international figure. Forbes Magazine ranked Abdullah the world's seventh most powerful leader as well as the most influential Muslim and Arab one. The magazine also ranked him the third wealthiest royal, having amassed an $18 billion fortune.

Abdullah had at least 36 brothers and half-brothers (estimates run as high as 46) and suffered throughout his career from intra-family rivalries stemming from their different mothers. His own, Fahda bint al-Shuraim, came from the Shammar tribe, while his main competitors, the so-called Sudairi Seven, belonged to the Dawasir with the same mother, Hassa al-Sudairi.

Nonetheless, Abdullah proved enormously skillful in handling family and religious politics. This was reflected in his success in keeping the support of the kingdom's reactionary Wahhabi religious establishment even while curbing its powers and influence. He also prevailed over the Sudairi princes who had schemed to block his ascent to crown prince in 1995 after King Fahd suffered a debilitating stroke.

Fahd's state of extremely poor health left Crown Prince Abdullah de facto ruler of the kingdom for an entire decade until the king's death in August 2005. Even then, Abdullah had to cope with three powerful Sudairi crown princes, two of whom died before he did while the third, Prince Salman, is now the new king. In the end, Abdullah prevailed over notable opposition within the family Allegiance Council to his choice of Muqrin as the next crown prince and convinced a majority of its members to approve him last March.

Educated in religious schools of the royal court, Abdullah proved a far more progressive ruler, and more pro-American, than either most Saudis or outside analysts had anticipated. The late king began his rise to power after being named commander in 1962 of the 125,000-man Saudi National Guard, a force made up partly of highly conservative and fiercely loyal tribal levees responsible for protecting the House of Saud. Even after becoming king in 2005, Abdullah kept the National Guard as his private power base. When he finally stepped down as its commander in 2010, he made sure it remained in his branch of the al-Saud family by installed his son, Prince Miteb, as his replacement.

Despite his early reputation as anti-American, Abdullah never slackened in his dependence on American expertise and arms in his drive to modernize the National Guard. During his reign, Saudi Arabia also adopted a plan to purchase at least $60 billion in U.S. arms, locking in Saudi long-term reliance on Washington for its security. At the same time, Abdullah became increasingly disillusioned with President Obama after he abandoned Mubarak, refused to arm Syrian rebels and opened nuclear talks with Iran—Saudi Arabia's main rival for regional power.

Abroad, Abdullah hewed closely to the kingdom's longstanding alliance with the United States. But he was deeply disappointment with its inability to negotiate a settlement to the Palestinian conflict, strongly opposed to its decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and held deep misgivings over the outcome of the U.S. engagement with Iran over its nuclear program. Still, Abdullah readily

joined the U.S.-led military coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria even though he felt strongly its primary goal should be the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The new King Salman is not expected to shift away from Saudi Arabia's primary dependence on the United States for its security. Abdullah clearly hoped to go down in Saudi history as a reformer. Initially, he encouraged debate and a groundswell of public pressure for change that came in the form of numerous petitions from liberals demanding an elected Shura Council and other steps toward a constitutional monarch. He initiated a national dialogue among the kingdom's feuding religious sects and liberals to promote greater tolerance and consensus on reform.

Along the way, he ran into stiff resistance from the Sudairi princes, but above all from Wahhabi clerics dead set against any political reforms, women's rights, or restrictions on their own authority. Then, the Arab uprisings of early 2011 made Abdullah himself far more cautious in pressing for reform and supportive of a harsh crackdown on human and political rights advocates.

Nonetheless, in September 2011, Abdullah decreed that women would have the right to vote and stand for office in the 2015 municipal elections. In 2013, he appointed 30 women to the all-male Shura Council. His reign saw other changes in women's status as well, including their own national identity cards and the right of female lawyers to defend clients in all-male religious courts. Meanwhile, he pushed education for women to the point where they outnumbered men at Saudi universities.

Abdullah's other notable initiative was to send abroad more than 100,000 Saudi students—80,000 to the United States alone—for a non-religious education under a royal scholarship program that he personally financed and bore his name. This came after he largely gave up on reforming the religiously-dominated Saudi school system. He also gave $10 billion to build and endow the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology where he insisted women and men study together. When one government Wahhabi cleric criticized the mingling of the sexes there, Abdullah fired him.

The late king took on the Wahhabi establishment again and again even though it constitutes the al-Saud family's most important pillar of support, an alliance dating back to the mid-18th Century when Wahhabism emerged as the defining puritanical creed of the first Saudi kingdom. Abdullah curbed the powers of its 6,000-man religious police force, known as the Committee for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice. He also appointed a reformer to curb its much-criticized excesses.

In his waning years, Abdullah stunned Saudis and foreign analysts alike by undertaking the most delicate political task of his reign—changing how kings are chosen. In 2006, Abdullah initiated a new selection process by establishing a family Allegiance Council empowered to debate, approve, or disapprove the king's choice for crown prince. In December 2007, he appointed 36 surviving sons and grandsons of the king's founding father, King Abdulaziz, to the innovative body.

The council's first real test only came last March over voting Prince Muqrin to be the next crown prince despite the fact his mother was Yemeni-born, which had previously been regarded as making him ineligible for the kingship. This may have been a factor in the lack of consensus within the al-Saud family over his appointment and a source of renewed contention later on.

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