

Viewpoints
No. 75

Watch out Washington, the Saudi Hawks are in Ascendancy

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The latest shakeup in the ruling House of Saud has assured that Washington's favorite prince, Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, will now become king as he is anointed heir apparent. But it also likely heralds new tensions in U.S.-Saudi relations as a new breed of "Saudi hawks" comes to power. They are opposed to any U.S. détente with Iran, its chief rival for regional hegemony. They are also gearing up for a military showdown with Tehran's allies in the Yemeni civil war, while the Obama administration is pressing for a negotiated political solution there.

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The Obama administration should be delighted with the changes in the line of succession announced April 29 by King Salman of Saudi Arabia. He has named Washington's favorite royal the new crown prince and elevated his ambassador to Washington to foreign minister. Relations should become closer than ever. Paradoxically, this may prove not to be the case. Saudi Arabia and the United States are on a collision course in their policies simultaneously toward war in Yemen and peace with Iran.

Both the newly designated crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef, and foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, belong to a new breed of "Saudi hawks" coming to power. They are strong advocates of asserting Saudi military power into the Yemeni civil war and standing up to Iran, the kingdom's chief rival for regional hegemony. They feel Iran is to blame for the Houthis' seizure of power in Yemen, which they regard as preeminent in the Saudi sphere of influence. They also fear that the inevitable outcome of a U.S.-Iranian nuclear deal will be a new American "tilt" toward Tehran at Saudi expense.

The Obama administration, on the other hand, is pressing the Saudis to get into negotiations quickly with the Iranian-backed Houthis and their allies, who still control the Yemeni capital of Sana'a and most of the country, and are thus likely to prevail at this point in any political settlement. President Obama has also invited the six monarchs of the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council to Washington and Camp David May 13-14 to try to sell them on the benefits of a nuclear agreement and U.S. reconciliation with Iran.

The latest changes in the royal succession line have consolidated the hold of Saudi hawks over foreign policy led by the new crown prince, Mohammed bin Nayef, and his deputy, Mohammed bin Salman. The two are known as the "Two Mohammeds" or "MBN and MBS" to distinguish them. Most remarkable is that King Salman has given enormous power to his son, Mohammed bin Salman, who is only 29 years old and has little experience in wielding power, the normal prerequisite together with age for entering the succession line. With little experience in military affairs, he nonetheless is the defense minister and the king's chief military adviser, and has now been appointed deputy crown prince.

Far more expected was King Salman's naming as his immediate successor Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, who is credited with crushing al-Qaeda inside the kingdom and nearly lost his life to one of its suicide bombers in 2009. [Washington has been treating him as its favored heir apparent](#) ever since he became interior minister in 2012, rolling out the red carpet and granting access to its highest officials whenever he visits.

The "Two Mohammeds" are in charge of the Saudi air campaign against the Iranian-backed Houthis and their allies in the Yemeni civil war. The almost daily bombardments that began on March 26 have gone on for over a month, yet they have failed so far to bring the Houthis to the negotiating table. This has left the Saudi government in a quandary about what to do next. The United States, which has provided critical logistical and intelligence support to the Saudi effort, faces the same dilemma. Washington has been pressing for an end to the fighting and for a start of negotiations; Riyadh is preparing to escalate its military involvement and determined to see

that fallen Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansor Hadi and his government – now based in the Saudi capital – are restored to power.

King Salman's royal shakeup has brought to an end the political careers of two key figures in the ruling House of Saud. It has also revealed the depth of infighting over the succession issue among the various branches of the royal family as well as the limits of kingly powers.

In an unprecedented step, Salman deposed Crown Prince Muqrin, his own half-brother, to make way for his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, who belongs to the "Sudairi clan" within the family – as does the king. Muqrin, 69, hails from a different branch and is the youngest son of the founder of the kingdom, King Abdulazaiz Ibn Saud. Muqrin had been the personal choice of King Abdullah, who died in January.

Upon naming Muqrin crown prince in March 2014, Abdullah had insisted publicly his choice could not be questioned or reversed by anyone in the future because it had been formally approved by the family's Allegiance Council, which is responsible for approving or rejecting the king's nomination. Abdullah even disclosed that he and then Crown Prince Salman had signed a document agreeing on Muqrin. However, there was one sign of serious family discord even at the time, namely that Muqrin had won only 75 percent of the 36 princes who make up the council.

King Salman has now made clear that the king's writ only lasts until he dies. Whatever one king decrees can be overturned by the next king, a precedent that may come to haunt the ruling family. However, with both the new crown prince and his deputy belonging to the same Sudairi clan, there is a good possibility the issue will not arise for decades to come.

Muqrin's fate was almost immediately sealed after Salman became king in January. He isolated the crown prince, giving him no responsibilities and sending him to welcome minor visiting dignities at the airport. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry did not even bother to meet Muqrin when he visited Riyadh in March, concentrating his time and attention to getting to know Mohammed bin Nayef better instead.

The other royal figure of note exiting the Saudi political stage is Prince Saud el-Faisal, 75, who had served as foreign minister for 40 years, setting a world record. Princeton-educated and well known to Washington as a key intermediary in U.S.-Saudi relations, Saud el-Faisal has been in failing health the past several years. He has been repeatedly in and out of a California hospital for back operations and missed King Abdullah's funeral in January because of his health. He is still slated to keep a hand in foreign policy, acting as a senior adviser to King Salman.

Taking his place is Adel al-Jubeir, 53, ambassador to Washington since 2007 but involved in the making of U.S.-Saudi relations since 1987, when he began serving as special assistant to the former longtime Saudi ambassador, Prince Bandar bin Sultan. A graduate of the University of North Texas and Georgetown, Jubeir was extremely close to the late King Abdullah. He spent much of his time shuttling back and forth to Riyadh to serve as the king's interpreter in myriad meetings with U.S. officials. Though not a member of the royal family like the two former Saudi ambassadors to Washington, Jubeir has clearly won the appreciation of two Saudi kings in their often contentious dealing with the kingdom's most important foreign ally. U.S.-Saudi relations

now seem headed for renewed strains over both Yemen and Iran, and Jubeir has emerged as one of the chief public defender of the new Saudi hawkish policy.

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