

The Saudian Kingdom after Transition

Slumbering Giant or Powerless Great Power?

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Executive Summary

On August 1, 2005, Fahd Bin Abd al Aziz, the king of Saudi Arabia, died. Since it had been known for a long time that the monarch was in bad health, his half-brother, Crown Prince Abdallah, had taken over the business of government as early as 1995. Immediately after the death of the head of state became known, Abdallah was appointed his successor. Prince Sultan, another half-brother of the deceased as well as of the new ruler, became minister of defence.

Although the old King's costly trips to his summer residence at Marbella, Spain, always accompanied by a many-headed entourage, embittered the Saudi people who suffered from unemployment, the monarch adopted other measures that were quite popular, such as eliminating some of the royal family's privileges, cutting emoluments for princes and renouncing the title of 'majesty'. All in all, however, neither Fahd nor Abdallah actively shaped the radical transformation the Saudi royal house is facing. At this point, it is worthwhile to take a look at the beginnings of the development.

When, at the age of 23, Crown Prince Fahd took over the rule of Saudi Arabia, the kingdom was a secluded state that was unwilling to let anybody, especially anybody from the West, see exactly what it was doing. Until this day, this has not changed, and the country, whose welfare foundations and organizations were of particular importance in spreading Islamist ideologies, still plays an ambivalent role indeed.

In the '80s, strengthening the Islamists was part of the western strategy, since they were quite welcome as another defence against communism. However, the Islamists were thoroughly underestimated, as the events of September 11, 2001, would later show. Following these events, the United States pressed the Saudis to close the above-mentioned foundations. Given the fact that both states are closely tied, King Abdallah generally guarantees continuity in his relations with the United States: On the one hand, the ruling family in Riyadh depends on the protection of the superpower; on the other hand, Washington does appreciate the benevolent attitude of the leading oil producer. Nevertheless, the kingdom faces a transformation. It has to decide between its pro-western orientation, its role within global Islam, and the demand for reform.

Saudi Arabia experienced a first wave of modernization under King Faisal, who was assassinated in 1975. His revolutionary plan to pacify the Middle East included the recognition of Israel. Because of problems with Saudi and Iranian Shiites demonstrating on their pilgrimage to Mecca, because of incidents with Iranian pilgrims in 1987 that caused the death of 400 people, and because of an insurgence which, aiming to eliminate the discrepancy between Saudi-Arabian ideology and the actual situation within the kingdom, got out of hand and ended in the execution of the ringleaders, any hope of reform was smothered. Instead, these events resulted in Usama Bin Laden renewing the demands of the dead insurgents.

King Fahd responded in two ways. On the one hand, he emphasized his loyalty to Islam by taking on the title of 'guardian of the haramayn'; on the other, he deepened his relations with the United States, whose troops he had to tolerate even in his own territory after Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait. This behaviour, which in the eyes of the Islamists constituted a sin against wahhabism, did not remain without consequences: Islamism became more radical and found its new leading figure in the Jihadist Usama Bin Laden, who had returned from Afghanistan.

Before Bin Laden called upon the people to rise against the King in 1995, he demanded the King's resignation in writing. In this letter, he not only criticized the subservience of the Saudi ulema who obeyed the royal house that paid them, but also two of their fatwas that endorsed the stationing of American troops in Saudi Arabia as well as the attempt to make peace with Israel.

The new monarch in Riyadh is a scion of the union between Abd al Aziz and Bint Asi al Shuraym, and as such he is in an uncomfortable position in the house of Saud. Meanwhile, Abdallah has tried to make his government more loyal to himself by strategic reshuffling. However, his position is not assured, since the power of the house lies in the hands of the older princes and sons of Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, the founder of the state, and within this circle, in turn, in the hands of the clan of the so-called Sudairi Seven, Ibn Saud's sons from his marriage with Hussa Bint Ahmad al Sudairi. And Abdallah is not one of them.

The Saudi state, which is familiar with the western model of separation of powers only to some extent, is based on wahhabite Islam, with the King in control as chairman of the council of ministers. He has legislative powers, yet he must act in conformance with the sharia and accept further limitations to his declared power imposed by other Saudi traditions. Moreover, he always has to find a compromise within the royal house and seek the consent of the ulema. The growing number of Islamist groups under the leadership of al-Qaeda threatens the kingdom's stability, which the Saudi kings succeeded in securing for such a long time.

However, the pragmatism of the royal house as well as its relations with Great Britain and the United States seem flexible enough to protect the existing power structures. One part of this strategy that can also be seen as a response to external pressure is to carry out reforms. To this end, numerous conferences were organized to discuss security, freedom, and women's rights, contacts with the liberal foreign opposition were established, and local elections held in February 2005, the first elections in the history of the Islamic kingdom.

The council of ministers, which was established in 1953, includes the King, the Crown Prince, the Vice Crown Prince, and all the ministers. The fact that not all the key ministries are occupied by royal princes today is due to Abdallah who thus demonstrated his willingness to carry out reforms to the west. The consultative council that was appointed in 1993 comprises 60 members nominated by the King. Their main function is to initiate discussions on societal issues and to support the monarch in decision-making. Whereas the council enjoyed only limited sovereignty in the beginning, its members appear increasingly self-confident today. There are some competences that are shared by both the council of ministers and the consultative council, i.e. they are overlapping. This speaks for a pragmatic policy that allows the King to set both bodies against each other so as to protect his own power.

Responses to the local elections in Saudi Arabia were generally negative. Since women were completely excluded from voting, and the right to vote was limited to only one quarter of the

male population, reform-oriented critics spoke of window-dressing. Nevertheless, the poll is a first step on the path to reform.

After Fahd died, the oil prices on the derivatives markets rose. However, some maintain that the kingdom will hold on to its oil policy in the long run which, in the case of sanctions being imposed on Iran, would upgrade its political position. From the wave of democratization initiated by the United States in the region, Saudi Arabia has nothing to fear. Washington is hardly likely to support the Saudi people as they strive for more democracy. As long as Riyadh is able to cover America's oil demand and fight Islamism, it can be sure of America's support or, at least, of its silence.

Abdallah is likely to maintain continuity in domestic and foreign policy. However, he is dependent on his council of princes and should steer clear of a policy that is too self-confident, to avoid provoking intrigues. Another critical case in point is the squad of ancients in the Saudi royal house and the unresolved question of succession arising from it. If, every two to three years, a dead ruler is succeeded by a king aged over 70, the question of who will reign the country in the medium term remains open. Other problems include the danger of a revolution from within the country as well as the consequences of the progressive impoverishment of the Saudi people as the welfare state reaches its limits. The tasks that will have to be solved by the new Saudi king are numerous and complex. Ingenious pragmatism combined with traditional fundamental tenets of faith could prevent the country from breaking apart. Given this situation of walking on a tightrope, the monarch would do well to take his own father for his role model.