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About the Author

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Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia: Challenges before the Desert Kingdom

At the end of December last year, as the 90-year old King Abdullah was admitted to a hospital with a lung infection, Saudi Arabia maintained a respectful calm as its revered monarch of ten years prepared to go into the sunset. But among several American observers there was a near-hysteria as they competed with one another to presage the most dire or outrageous prognostications. The themes were familiar: A fierce power struggle among the royal family members involving princes divided into well-defined factions; the poor health of the crown prince; and the Saudi state on the verge of collapse. Simon Henderson of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and one of the most prolific writers on Saudi Arabia confidently predicted two weeks before King Abdullah's death on January 23 that the “coming transition is unlikely to be smooth” and spoke of “two factions [in the royal family] vying for pre-eminence.”¹

Another commentator, Stephen Kinzer, wrote just three days before Abdullah's demise that “[t]he most intriguing candidate for collapse is Saudi Arabia.”² He mentioned a possible power struggle within the royal family which could be “intense or violent.” On the same lines, Richard Haass wrote in the *Financial Times* that “the succession issue has been shelved, not solved,” even though a prince of the next generation aged just 55 years has been named in the succession line.³

Royal Family Numbers

The smooth transfer of power on the day of Abdullah's death and the clear line of succession for the next two rulers has confounded the doomsayers, but is not surprising to most serious observers of the Kingdom's royal family. It must be admitted that the family itself, by maintaining a studied opacity about every aspect of its functioning, does not make any effort to facilitate studies by political scientists, leaving the field open to ill-founded speculations. Even the size of the royal family is not known with any degree of certainty. John Gordon Lorrimer of the Indian Civil Service prepared a family tree of the Al Saud family in 1908.⁴ Starting with Mohammed (d. 1765), the paterfamilias of the family in the 18th century, Lorrimer ended the family tree with the older children of King Abdulaziz (1880-1953), born in the first decade of the last century. Every descendant of every person shown on this chart is a member of the Saudi royal family today.

In 1980, a British military attaché in Riyadh, Brian Lees, prepared an updated family tree, confined largely to the children and grandchildren of King Abdulaziz, who numbered nearly 800 at that time.⁵ It is estimated that the royal family today numbers at least 15,000 members who are entitled to be referred to as His/Her Highness (HH).⁶ There is a sub-grouping within the family: All children and grandchildren of monarchs are entitled to be called His/Her Royal Highness (HRH). The number in the latter, more exclusive group is not known, but male members are usually estimated at 1,500.

Royal Family “Politics”

What is astonishing about the family is that, in spite of such large numbers, its affairs remain shrouded in secrecy. There is hardly ever an

instance of a prince commenting on family matters, although the size of the family and the sub-groups (complicated by inter-marriages, usually arranged) should inevitably throw up a fair share of disgruntled individuals denied a suitable role in the political or economic order.⁷ Two points need to be noted in this regard: One, the family has its own meritocracy, so that the most able members from different branches are brought into the government and given a chance to prove themselves; and two, every effort is made to ensure that no section of the family is marginalised to the extent that its discontent festers and corrodes family unity from within. This has enabled the family to cope with extraordinary challenges, such as the abdication of King Saud in 1964, the assassination of King Faisal by a nephew in 1975 and the prolonged illness of King Fahd, when he was largely incapacitated for ten years from 1995 to 2005.

There is certainly “politics” within the family, as in any state order, with monarchs attempting to strengthen themselves by bringing full brothers, sons or members of certain sub-groups close to them by placing them in senior government positions. In this, the royal family is not very different from a modern political party, with members joining factions of like-minded individuals to position themselves for power and influence.

To maintain family unity (and, by extension, the family's credibility with the Saudi population at large), monarchs tend to function in a collegial manner, so that policies on issues of family or national importance are the result of consensus among senior royals. This imparts continuity and stability to the national order and avoids dissident groups within the family. There is consequently no room for capricious conduct on the part of rulers; thus, while the political order is authoritarian, it is not a

tyranny such as Saddam's Iraq, Gaddafi's Libya, Syria of the Assads, or Egypt of its four military dictators.

This is not to suggest that there is never any discord within the family. Recall here the abdication of King Saud in 1964, forced upon him by a coalition of senior royals backing Faisal; or more recently, the abrupt dismissal in November 2012 of interior minister Prince Ahmad, full brother of Fahd, Sultan, Nayef and Salman, and a contender for the throne; or the dismissal of Prince Khalid bin Sultan and later of Prince Khalid bin Bandar as deputy defence ministers. But the point to be noted is that in not one instance did any person express dissatisfaction publically at the treatment meted out to him. Clearly, family unity trumps personal ambition. In any case, unhappiness is not allowed to fester, since a position is usually found for the person concerned or his close family member.

Outside the royal family too, there is a meritocracy in place, so that the Kingdom's leaders have access to the best possible advice. However, no non-royal has any real role in policymaking. Officials, however exalted their position, are advisers and implementers of policy, so that there are no changes if they are moved out.

Appointments by King Salman

The appointments that have been recently made by King Salman have to be seen against this backdrop. He used the Allegiance Council⁸ to endorse the appointment of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef as deputy crown prince and second deputy prime minister, thus placing him in the line of succession to the throne after Crown Prince Muqrin, the first scion of the next generation of the Al Saud family in this position. He

has also removed two sons of the late king who were governors of Riyadh and Mecca provinces, while retaining Prince Miteb bin Abdullah as the head of the National Guard. Most dramatically, he has named a younger son of his, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, aged just 35 years, as defence minister and head of the royal court. These appointments follow previous patterns of kings showing their special affection for their younger sons by giving them exalted positions. Often, such elevations have not survived the departure of the ruler.

On the day of King Abdullah's death, 34 royal decrees were issued which collectively constitute a thorough overhaul of the government. Besides the succession line and the appointment of governors from the royal family, the king abolished 12 governing bodies and replaced them with just two, the Council of Political and Security Affairs, which will be headed by Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs to be headed by his son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, thus giving the latter a position of extraordinary power and influence in the new administration. Again, for the first time in Saudi history, a non-royal military officer has been appointed the head of foreign intelligence.

Already there are speculations in the media and academic circles that the new arrangements are a serious setback to the sons of the former king on the ground that two sons have been removed as governors while Prince Miteb's aspirations to be named deputy crown prince have been quashed. David Hearst was among the first commentators to rush into print his views on the day of the late king's death; not surprisingly, he got most things wrong.⁹ He referred to the new king's first appointments as a "palace coup" on the ground that Prince Miteb had not been named

deputy crown prince and that Khalid al-Tuwaijry had been removed as the head of the royal court.

The scenario does not merit such a dramatic assessment. Given the secrecy that surrounds all royal family matters, Prince Miteb's ambitions will not be made clear in the near future, if at all.¹⁰ His control over the National Guard will in any case ensure that he will remain an important centre of influence in royal counsels for several years to come. What cannot be denied is that Mohammed bin Nayef, besides his excellent pedigree, had been seen as a rising star in the royal family for several years and was known to be close to the late ruler.¹¹ In fact, when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh came to Riyadh in February 2010, King Abdullah requested him to meet Prince Mohammed (then deputy interior minister) even before the official commencement of the visit, so that he could be briefed on what the Kingdom was doing to combat extremism. Again, Hearst has given disproportionate importance to Tuwaijry; yes, he did enjoy the king's confidence (as any senior courtier should), but that does not translate into him being the architect of the Saudi policy to back al-Sisi in Egypt, as implied by the author. Contrary to what Hearst says, there should be no change in the Saudi approach to Egypt only due to Tuwaijry's departure.

More seriously, Hearst has painted a picture of a country with a near-incapacitated ruler, one that is devoid of national institutions and in the throes of a vicious power struggle among senior royals. He repeats that King Salman "is known to have Alzheimer's, but the exact state of his dementia is a source of speculation." These points were perhaps first made by Simon Henderson, and have gained credence through repetition, so that in a recent piece, Henderson has referred to sources by name (Bruce Riedel and the BBC) who had merely repeated what he

himself had first said about Salman's health.¹² This point has been repeated so many times that scholars no longer feel the need to give any evidence to support their statement.¹³ While there is no denying the fact that King Salman is 79 years old and has had health problems, he still presides over cabinet meetings, receives foreign dignitaries and travels abroad. It is still much too early to write him off as non-functional.

One last point to make about the royal family pertains to the all-too-frequent references to the so-called “Sudairy Seven,” the seven sons of King Abdulaziz from Princess Hassa Ahmad Al Sudairy, of whom the first four (Fahd, Sultan, Nayef and Salman) have been prominent in Saudi affairs for half a century. After Salman's accession and the appointment of Prince Mohammed bin Nayef as deputy crown prince, the theme of Sudairy resurgence in royal family matters has been resurrected. This is perhaps being overdone—the Sudairys certainly do not now have the cohesiveness they might have had earlier. Two full brothers, Abdul Rehman and Ahmad, were deliberately excluded from succession, while the children of Crown Prince Sultan do not have important positions so far in the reign of their uncle. Prince Ahmad was removed as interior minister by King Abdullah and Ahmad's own nephew Mohammed bin Nayef was appointed in his place. The interplay among the royals of the next generation will be influenced, first, by their access to power sources (i.e., security, national guard and the armed forces), and second, by personal ability. In any case, all major decisions on matters of national interest will continue to be taken collectively by the senior royals.

Al Saud and Wahhabiya

A word about the ties of the Al Saud with Wahhabiya: Saudi Arabia is a unique modern state founded on a religio-political affiliation between

the royal family and the doctrines of an 18th century Islamic reformist movement that upholds the centrality of God (*tawhid*, 'oneness'), and rejects any form of association with Allah. Its tenets are the most rigid and literalist among all of Islam's schools of thought. These tenets have spilt into the public domain—they provide for *hudud* punishments (beheadings and amputations of limbs for serious crimes) and impinge on the personal conduct of all residents in the country, enforcing norms of female modesty, restrictions on women's movements and employment, and gender segregation that do not exist in any other polity. What makes them particularly onerous and obnoxious is the fact that they are enforced by the intrusive institution called the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which enforces its diktat through the ubiquitous *muttawwa*, loosely referred to as Islam's religious police. It cannot be denied that while the Saudi state is not a tyranny and its rulers favour co-option over coercion, the *muttawwa* are an instrument of coercion which, in the name of Islamic norms, are used to enforce conformity and suppress dissent.

However, the affiliation of the state to the tenets of Wahhabiya, while legitimising the rule of the Al Saud, also circumscribes the options available to the rulers and demands their continued subordination to its norms. The affiliation has given a relatively free hand to Wahhabi clergy in the areas of religion, education, and social and cultural life, in return for their support in the political arena. Over the years, this has proved to be a mutually beneficial arrangement. The royal family has obtained fulsome clerical support at times of national crisis, such as the use of Western troops against the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait or the mobilisation of a national effort against Al Qaeda, while the clergy have imbued the state order with their most rigid and demanding doctrinal values.

What is more, the requirement of continually being subject to the tenets of Wahhabiya can be used to judge the royal family's own actions and find them wanting, to see the state order as corrupt, or as indifferent to Muslim interests, or as accommodative of aspects of modernity that are viewed as un-Islamic. These issues led to the first attack on the royal order in 1979, when a radical Islamic group occupied the Haram Sharif in Mecca to protest against the “anti-Islam” policies of the monarchy.

Later, in the 1990s, a group of dissident intellectuals emerged from within the Wahhabi establishment and criticised the royal family for deviating from Islamic values and principles, and demanded a thorough reform of the country's political, economic, administrative and cultural order. The royal family used coercive measures against these dissidents, collectively referred to as the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement, but could not extinguish the campaign. Today, it has re-emerged after the Arab Spring and constitutes the most serious challenge to the Al Saud order.

Domestic Challenges

One of the unique aspects of the rule of the Al Saud family has been its ability to cope successfully with serious challenges that it and the country have faced over the last one hundred years once the modern Kingdom was established. In the early days of national conquest, King Abdulaziz had used the *Ikhwan*, zealous and ruthless Wahhabi warriors, as his principal armed force. After the Kingdom had been consolidated, the *Ikhwan* attempted to influence Abdulaziz's administration so as to make it conform to their rigid norms. The king would not tolerate any challenge to his authority and in time physically annihilated them, thus establishing royal prerogative over the state order.

In the 1950s, the Kingdom faced an ideological and military threat from the revolutionary rulers who had taken power in Egypt, and blandished Arab socialism as the alternative to monarchical rule. The Kingdom used the services of the Muslim Brotherhood members, then living in exile in Saudi Arabia, to counter these secular pan-Arab allures with the alternative of Islamic identity, which resonated with common people in the Arab world. Later, Saudi Arabia mobilised the entire Muslim world on the platform of Islam by leading the establishment of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

In 1979, Saudi Arabia met the twin challenges of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the occupation of the holy mosque in Mecca with two initiatives of its own: One, it supported Iraq in confronting Iran in the First Persian Gulf War to stem the tide of the revolution into the Gulf; and two, it participated in the global jihad in Afghanistan against “godless communism” alongside Pakistan and the US, giving birth, as an unintended consequence, to a pervasive jihadi mindset among Muslims globally as well as to Al Qaeda, the institution that would represent their aspirations. Throughout the 1990s, it coped with the dissident movement organised by the Awakening Sheikhs (the Sahwa Movement) through large-scale arrests and long detentions.

However, the havoc that was wreaked upon the United States on 9/11 by a 19-person group that included 15 Saudi nationals dealt a body-blow to the Kingdom's self-confidence and compelled it to review its accommodative approach to jihad both at home and in the region. Led by King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia, under considerable US pressure, embarked on reforming its education system, and, through a series of national dialogues, began a process of nation-wide consultations on national issues such as democracy, place of religion in the polity, gender-

related issues and human rights. In this period, the ruler was inundated with petitions advocating comprehensive national reform, and there was every indication that sweeping changes relating to human rights, gender issues and elections were in the offing. However, with the inability of the US forces to subdue the insurgency in Iraq, external pressure in support of reform died away and the US re-affirmed its ties with the authoritarian rulers in West Asia.

Deteriorating Strategic Environment

Saudi leaders strongly counselled the US against the assault on Iraq in 2003, pointing out that regime change would empower the Shia and thus redound to the advantage of Iran. Its concerns were well-founded. The US commitment to the Shia in Iraq came to define Iraqi politics purely in sectarian terms, so that over time the Sunni community felt increasingly marginalised, even as Iran expanded its influence in the country. There are reports that state and private sources in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries backed the mobilisation of Sunni groups to oppose the Baghdad government, thus directly or inadvertently preparing the ground for the jihadi forces that emerged in Iraq—the Al Qaeda in Iraq under Zarqawi, which later became the Islamic State of Iraq under Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, before emerging in June 2014 as the Islamic State of Iraq and (Greater) Syria (ISIS) under the same leader.

During the 2000s, Iranian influence came to dominate much of West Asia: The Hamas in Palestine are beholden to Iran as are the Hizbollah in Lebanon, and Syria has already been a strategic ally for a few decades. Iran then made an entry into Yemeni affairs by supporting a nascent Zaydi (Shia) dissident movement, the Al Houthi group, which was seeking to assert Zaydi influence in Yemeni affairs, which it had lost due

to the increasing affiliation of the president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, with Sunni groups sponsored by Saudi Arabia. Thus, at the end of 2010, Saudi Arabia saw itself at a great strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis Iran across the whole region, and viewed the so-called “Shia Crescent” surrounding it as a threatening reality.

The Arab Spring further complicated the situation from the Saudi perspective. With the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the Kingdom lost an important strategic partner, and the situation worsened with the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt, given the possibility that groups affiliated with it would take over power in other countries where tyrants were toppled as well. The last straw for the Kingdom was the demand for reform in Bahrain; the Saudi view was that any reform there would empower the majority Shia community which would bring Iranian influence to the very doorstep of Saudi Arabia, besides encouraging similar agitations for reform among the Shia in the Kingdom itself.

Saudi Arabia saw these developments as an existential threat. In defence of its interests, it now abandoned its quietist, behind-the-scenes diplomatic approach to regional developments and embarked on an active policy of confrontation against Iran, commencing with regime change in Syria. Rami Khouri sees this period as “a new season of Saudi assertiveness.”¹⁴ Its intention was to snap Iran's ties with Syria and the Hizbollah, so that two major Arab states would return to the mainstream Arab fold in one stroke. Similarly in Egypt, Saudi Arabia confronted the Brotherhood challenge by supporting the military coup by General Al Sisi and providing the latter with the required financial support that was initially denied to the regime by western powers.

The Kingdom's activist policies have not yielded the results it had anticipated; on the contrary, the security scenario has deteriorated considerably to its disadvantage. First, regime change in Syria has proved to be much more difficult than the Kingdom had anticipated. Although over 220,000 people have been killed, millions displaced and major cities destroyed, the regime remains resilient, with no sign of a robust US military intervention to topple Bashar Al Assad. In fact, there are now suggestions that the US may have given up on regime change and sees the Assad regime as the main instrument against the ISIS.¹⁵

Second, the conflict in Syria and the tacit support given by the GCC countries to Sunni dissident elements over the last decade have led to the emergence of the ISIS, which has declared a caliphate in territories militarily occupied by it across the Levant. ISIS is now in competition with Al Qaeda for ideological influence and geographical space, and poses a doctrinal and military threat to the Kingdom, thousands of whose citizens have rushed to join this militant movement and savour Sunni resurgence and military triumph.

Third, to great Saudi dismay, just when its competition with Iran was at its peak, the US, at the end of 2013, opened a dialogue with Iran to address the longstanding nuclear issue. While progress has been slow and a positive outcome is still not assured, the cordial atmosphere at the talks and constructive approach on both sides have considerably diluted the ill-will and animosity that had characterised the West's interaction with Iran over the last few decades. This new Iran-West bonhomie is creating a nightmare scenario for the Saudis, in which the US could countenance a greater Iranian role in the security architecture of the region.

Four, what has further aggravated the situation for Saudi Arabia is that the hitherto ragtag Houthi movement has now become audacious enough to mount an assault on the Yemeni capital itself, occupy large parts of the country, remove President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his government, and put in place their own governing council. Thus, the political order put in place by the GCC in 2011 (after encouraging Saleh to step down) is in disarray. The Kingdom is watching with concern as its former protégé, Saleh, has been guiding the Houthis in expanding their presence across the country while the government in Sanaa has ignominiously ceded power.¹⁶ More seriously, the Houthi triumph means for the Saudis a pernicious Iranian influence on the other side of the 1,400-km southern border it shares with Yemen.

Security Prospects

In the face of the Arab Spring, the Kingdom felt sufficiently threatened to make a series of bold moves of its own, such as distancing itself from the US—which it felt had betrayed Mubarak and showed no regard for Saudi interests in respect to Syria and Iran. Happily, the shared threat from ISIS has brought the US back to West Asia in a military role, in which it is being supported by GCC military forces. But recent developments indicate a major change in Saudi-US ties: The earlier relationship, where each side gave full and unquestioning support to the other, has irretrievably ended. Recall here the US's accommodativeness in re-affirming its partnership with Saudi Arabia after the attacks of 9/11, and the logistical support given by the Kingdom during the US assault on Iraq even when it opposed the attacks and felt they would advantage Iran strategically. The recent Saudi posture suggests the emergence of a new “transactional” relationship in which each side will take positions on regional issues in terms of its own interests. This is a

coming-of-age on the part of Saudi Arabia, in that it now feels confident enough to project political and military power in the region.¹⁷ Saudi leaders Abdullah and Salman defined and implemented this new approach, which will be the hallmark of Saudi diplomacy in the years to come.

Arab commentators have deplored the deteriorating security situation in West Asia over the last two years. In a recent article, the Kuwaiti observer Abdullah al Shayji stated that earlier he had believed 2013 to be the worst year for the Arabs, but he had later felt that 2014 was worse, when “the Arab centre had broken at the seams.”¹⁸ However, it already seems that 2015 will be even more damaging, due to the death of King Abdullah, the collapse of the government in Yemen, extremist activity in the Sinai, falling oil prices, and overt threats from President Rouhani against those he holds responsible for the sharp decline in oil prices, for which he has named Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The precipitate fall in oil prices over the last six months has important implications for the health of the West Asian economies as well as their political prospects. The causes of this fall are being widely debated: They are clearly linked with a short-term oversupply which could be corrected in a year or so. While many analysts and policymakers have looked toward Saudi Arabia to lead a cut in OPEC production, the Kingdom has seen this as ineffective and has decided not to intervene in the markets. However, Iran, whose exports are severely limited by sanctions, has been adversely hit; the poor state of its ties with Saudi Arabia has led its leaders to accuse the Kingdom of deliberately seeking to harm Iran and also to make some intemperate remarks about retaliatory action. The oil issue would certainly benefit from Saudi-Iranian engagement and dialogue.

The regional scenario inherited by King Salman has been described by Rami Khouri as "total chaos in some areas, partial state collapse in others, widespread use of political violence and terrorism, and massive intervention by foreign actors."¹⁹ He then goes on to point out that all these conflicts are directly linked to greater regional powers and at times even reflect global confrontations, so that in effect "there are no more local conflicts in this region [West Asia]"—almost all of them are the result of the Saudi-Iran regional strategic and sectarian competition.

Consequently, if peace and security are to prevail, King Salman and the new Saudi leadership will need to review their confrontationist approach against Iran which has yielded little advantage to them, but has strengthened the jihadi elements, spread the virus of sectarianism across West Asia, and caused death and destruction across the region. While the threat from ISIS has brought the US to the region in a limited military role, there is no indication of whether its effort, made up mainly of air attacks (with some ground action by the Kurds and the refurbished Iraqi army), will truly be effective or even whether the US has the stamina to stay on in West Asia in the face of increasing domestic disquiet. While the Kingdom has revealed its self-assurance in defining and projecting its interests on the basis of its political and military resources, the challenge before it is to engage with Iran constructively on the basis of this same self-confidence. It is only through collaborative effort with Iran that ISIS can be combatted effectively, Iraq stabilised, the Syrian conflict brought under control, the turmoil in Yemen ended and the sectarian scourge neutralised.

Saudi-Iranian cooperation and the defining of their actual collaboration on the ground will not be easily achieved in view of their deep-seated mutual suspicion and, on the Saudi side, a sense of existential threat from

Iran which has sectarian and strategic dimensions. But, the fact that the Americans are now committed to a rapprochement with Iran, see no merit in regime change in Syria and are not averse to some interaction with Brotherhood figures²⁰ should affirm to the new Saudi leadership the need for “new thinking,” as suggested by *Tehran Times* in a recent comment.²¹ The paper said that conditions that had prompted the hostility between them “have fundamentally altered,” and that the two countries now face “several unrelenting challenges” which should encourage them to work with each other.

On similar lines, Rami Khouri has pointed out:

I say there is no real conflict between Saudis and Iranians because these two countries do not threaten each other militarily or strategically, though they do react hysterically when they sense that the other is trying to undermine them ideologically. Tehran and Riyadh are regional powers who must be able to protect their national strategic interests in the region. They can do this best by having good bilateral relations and ... agreeing on a regional security framework.²²

Clearly, the advent of a new regime in Riyadh should be an opportunity not for continuity but real change. Re-engaging with Iran is likely to be one of two most serious challenges before the new regime in Riyadh in the coming months. The other will be that of domestic reform.

Domestic Prospects

As noted above, the Sahwa movement was cowed down in the 1990s as a result of state intimidation. However, it re-emerged after the events of 9/11 when pressures for reform from internal and external sources were at their peak. An "Islamo-liberal" petition, incorporating Islamic principles and modern ideas of democracy, was submitted to the ruler. The petitioners sought a constitution, separation of powers in the polity, human rights, and elections and an elected assembly. In December 2003, another petition called for the setting up of an "Islamic constitutional monarchy."²³ This effort at reform too died away in the face of US indifference and state coercion.

Later, the Arab Spring was enthusiastically welcomed in Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Salman Awda, who had been a lead role-player in the Sahwa movement of the 1990s, now broke his silence: In a statement addressed to "all Arab countries," he called on the authoritarian rulers to "proclaim [their] commitment to substantial and radical reform," and went on to say:

We have witnessed in Tunisia and Egypt that a spark set off in one place can catch fire elsewhere in an instant. We need a new relationship between the ruler and the ruled, one that is not based on fear.²⁴

Further on in April 2014, he criticised the crushing of democracy in Egypt thus:

The Gulf governments are fighting Arab democracy, because they fear it will come here. [The coup in Egypt] is

a Gulf project, not an Egyptian project. ... If [the Saudi government] continues on this path, it will lose its own people and invite disaster.²⁵

This view was echoed by another Islamist activist who said, “[Countries supporting the coup in Egypt are] taking part in committing a sin and an aggression forbidden by the laws of Islam.”²⁶

The Kingdom now has a new generation of intellectuals who are active in academic circles and the social media. According to Stephane Lacroix, a close observer of the Sahwa and contemporary Islamist movements in Saudi Arabia, these activists are “the only force [in the Kingdom] theoretically able to threaten the system.”²⁷ Since the commencement of the Arab Spring, they have been demanding constitutional reform, including a constitutional monarchy, an elected and empowered parliament and a prime minister answerable to it. The regime has responded with generous financial gifts for the poor, the young and the establishment clergy, with coercive measures being used against social media activists.

As of now, the promises of the Arab Spring lie in ruins, with authoritarian rule restored in Egypt and civil conflict and widespread destruction in Syria, Libya and Yemen. In this scenario, it is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects for reform on democratic lines in Saudi Arabia and other Arab autocracies. However, though the Kingdom's leaders may feel they have neutralised the reform movement, there is in fact no room for complacency for King Salman and his immediate successors for several reasons.

First, the idea of a democratic order has seeped deep into the Arab psyche; it is now intolerant of authoritarian rule, regardless of the basis on which it may be justified, such as national security or economic transformation. Second, the gap between the Islamists and the secular-liberals has been steadily bridged, with compromises being made on both sides, so that there now exists a pervasive Islamo-liberal discourse in the Kingdom that has reconciled the norms of Islam with the principles of democracy and has brought activists from the two streams onto the same platform.

Third, the agitation for reform in Saudi Arabia is being spearheaded by intellectuals steeped in Wahhabi learning but also familiar with modern political values and institutions, so that their Islamist discourse has a substantial liberal content. Therefore, they cannot accept national policies that have placed their country on the wrong side of almost every issue that resonates globally: Freedom, human rights, multiculturalism, transparency and accountability, gender sensitivity and personal dignity.

Four, given that the Sahwa movement has shown its resilience and dynamism over 20 years, in spite of considerable state coercion (as also generous blandishments to allure the disgruntled), it is unlikely that the modern-day activists will be easily intimidated or compromised.

The Saudi leadership that has just emerged perhaps represents the “last gasp of the old order”;²⁸ the Saudi commentator, Jamal Khashoggi has explained this best:

It's time to raise questions for the future. Democracy, popular participation or shura [consultation]—call it what you what you wish—will inevitably be realised. It's a

natural and inevitable development of history. One of most important conditions is the right to choose.... Democracy cannot be postponed until prosperity prevails and the economy improves and people's awareness increases... Tyranny cannot achieve prosperity and ensure a stable economy because the rules of disclosure, accountability and punishment will not be respected.²⁹

Endnotes:

1. Simon Henderson, “Royal Roulette,” *Foreign Policy*, January 7, 2015, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/royal-roulette; WINEP has been described “as part of the core” of the Israel lobby in Washington, which it has itself denied.
2. Stephen Kinzer, “Terrorism in Paris, Sydney the legacy of colonial blunders,” *The Boston Globe*, January 18, 2015, www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/01/18.
3. Richard Haass, “Saudi Arabia: threat from ISIS will only grow,” *Financial Times*, January 26, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/868f3396-a319-11e4-9c06-00144feab7de.html#axzz3QxBarLEp>.
4. John Gordon Lorrimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*. A few dozen copies were first published by the Government of India as a secret document in 1908 and 1915 in order to provide British agents and policymakers with “a convenient and portable handbook to the places and interests with which they are likely to be concerned”; reprinted in six volumes [5000 pages] by Cambridge Archive Editions in 1986; Vol. 6 contains 23 genealogical tables of the ruling families of the Gulf, including the Al Saud.
5. Brian M. Lees, *A Handbook of the Al Saud Ruling Family of Saudi Arabia* (London: Royal Genealogies, 1980).
6. “Palace Coup,” *The Economist*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2014/03/saudi-royal-family>.
7. A rare instance of public dissent was the outburst of one Prince Khaled Farhan Al Saud in August 2013, who accused the monarchy of corruption and silencing all voices of dissent. (He seems to be from a minor cadet branch of the family.)
8. Set up by King Abdullah in October 2006, the Allegiance Council initially had 35 members, comprising of sons and a few grandsons of King Abdulaziz. Its principal responsibility is to appoint the crown

prince. This council approved Prince Nayef as crown prince after Sultan in 2011, but was not convened when Salman was so named after Nayef's death in 2012. In 2014, the council met to affirm Muqrin as deputy crown prince, which it did with a three-fourth majority. (King Abdullah sought the council's support since Muqrin's mother was not a Najdi tribal but a Yemeni, which should normally have ruled him out of succession; Muqrin (b.1943) is the youngest living son of King Abdulaziz.)

9. David Hearst, "A Saudi Palace Coup," *Huffington Post*, January 23, 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/david-hearst/a-saudi-palace-coup.
10. In a recent interview, Theodore Karasik, an academic and risk consultant based in Dubai, says it was the conventional wisdom in the Arabian Peninsula that "King Abdullah was attempting to promote his son Prince Miteb into the succession chart." "Saudi sovereign transition: Dr. Theodore Karasik [One]," SUSRIS, February 3, 2015, susris.com/2015/02/03/sovereign-transition-in-saudi-arabia.
11. Prince Mohammed has been a hero-figure in the Kingdom for his pioneering role in seeking to rehabilitate jihadis through a re-education programme and because he survived a suicide bomb attack in August 2009 perpetrated by Al Qaeda; he was also responsible for counter-terrorism action. From February 2014, he handled the Syria file with King Abdullah's son, Prince Miteb. F. Gregory Gause III has this to say about Prince Mohammed: "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." "Saudi Arabia's Game of Thrones," *Foreign Affairs*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142842/f-gregory-gause-iii/saudi-arabias-game-of-thrones>.
12. Simon Henderson, "The Dangers of Saudi Succession," *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/01/the-dangers-of-saudi-succession/384820/>.

13. This cavalier attitude is perhaps being reviewed: The *Washington Post* retracted and published a correction of its report that King Salman was suffering from dementia; the paper now said this claim was “too speculative and unsubstantiated” and did not meet its “standards for publication.” Salma El Shahed, “WashPost retracts 'unsubstantiated' report on King Salman's health,” *Al Arabiya*, February 2, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/television-and-radio/2015/02/02/Washington-Post-apologizes-for-unsubstantiated-report-on-King-Salman-s-health.html>.
14. Rami G. Khouri, “Will royal succession change Saudi Arabia's regional role?,” *Al Jazeera*, January 26, 2015, www.america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/1/26.
15. Akbar Shahid Ahmed, “Springtime for Assad: Syria dictator in spotlight as potential US ally against ISIS,” *Huffington Post*, January 28, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/28/bashar-assad-obama_n_6559194.html?ir=India; Eyad Abu Shakra, “US Middle East policy after the Midterms,” *Asbarq al Awsat*, November 6, 2014, <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/11/article55338249/opinion-us-middle-east-policy-after-the-midterms>.
16. Haifa Al Maashi, “Partnership takes backstage as tribe dominates in Yemen,” *Gulf News*, January 31, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/partnership-takes-backstage-as-tribe-dominates-in-yemen-1.1449278>.
17. Rami Khouri has pointed out, “Perhaps the most intriguing facet of Saudi foreign policy assertiveness has been its independence from US influence... But [Saudi] tough talk doesn't... disguise the fact [that] many Saudi attempts to project power in the region in recent years have floundered or failed, often to the benefit of Iran.” Khouri, “Will royal succession.”
18. Abdullah Al Shayji, “Arab world can expect more turmoil this year,” *Gulf News*, February 2, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/arab-world-can-expect-more-turmoil-this-year-1.1449905>.

19. Rami Khouri, "No succession drama, but plenty of regional drama," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, January 28, 2015, <http://www.aucegypt.edu/gapp/cairoreview/Pages/articleDetails.aspx?aid=754>.
20. Linda S. Heard, "US Hobnobbing with 'the enemy'," *Gulf News*, February 2, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/us-hobnobbing-with-the-enemy-1.1450344>.
21. "Iran-Saudi ties: toward a measured assessment," *IRNA*, January 12, 2015, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81461044/>.
22. Rami G. Khouri, "Changed Ties with Iran will Re-configure the Middle East," *Middle East Online*, May 16, 2014, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=65997>.
23. Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 245-49.
24. Quoted in: Jean Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprisings* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011), 159-60.
25. Robert F. Worth, "Leftward Shift by Conservative Cleric Leaves Saudis Perplexed," *New York Times*, April 4, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/05/world/middleeast/conservative-saudi-cleric-salman-al-awda.html?_r=0.
26. Stephane Lacroix, "Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring," (research paper no.36, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in Gulf States, May 2014), p. 26.
27. Lacroix, "Saudi Islamists," p.1.
28. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "Arab Spring, Islamic Ice Age: Islamism, Democracy, and the Dictatorship of the "Liberalism of Fear" in the Era of Revolutions," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 30, no.4 (2013): 10.

29. Jamal Khashoggi, “It's democracy and not political Islam,” *Al Arabiya News*, November 17, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/11/17/It-s-democracy-and-not-political-Islam.html>.

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