

Major Shake-up in Saudi Monarchy

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In the biggest shake-up in Saudi Arabia in many decades, King Salman, who assumed power only three months ago on the death of King Abdullah, has fired the crown prince and the foreign minister, moving figures more closely tied to Washington into top positions.

The crisis atmosphere in ruling circles was expressed in the timing of the changes, announced in a communiqué issued at 4 a.m. local time in Riyadh, the capital city.

The 79-year-old king removed his 69-year-old half-brother, Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, replacing him with his nephew, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, who is the interior minister and head of security for the regime. He will be the first member of the generation of grandsons of the Saudi kingdom's, Abdulaziz ibn Saud, to be placed first in the line of succession to the throne.

Mohammed bin Nayef has emerged as the strongman of the regime, spearheading crackdowns on both Islamic fundamentalists opposed to the ruling family, and dissidents of every kind, from liberals to the Shiite minority to the vast immigrant workforce that performs most of the country's labor.

Perhaps more importantly, from the standpoint of the internecine struggle within the dynasty, the 55-year-old prince has no sons, making the position of deputy crown prince that much more important. Here Salman chose his own son, Mohammed bin Salman, who is only 34 years old, jumping him ahead of hundreds of more senior princes of his generation.

Mohammed bin Salman was named secretary of the royal court and the defense minister when his father succeeded to the throne in late January. In the latter position, he is responsible for both theaters of war in which Saudi armed forces are engaged: the bombing of Yemen, which could become a ground invasion; and the bombing of ISIS targets in Syria, where warplanes from Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies play a role in support of the predominately American military operation.

Press reports suggested that Prince Muqrin, who formerly headed Saudi intelligence operations, was removed at least in part because of opposition to the ongoing Saudi military campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

King Salman also removed Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal, a 75-year-old prince who has held the position for 40 years (he took office when Gerald Ford was president of the United States, Leonid Brezhnev headed the USSR, and Mao Zedong ruled China). His replacement is the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, 53, who is the first non-member of the royal family to hold the position since 1962.

The new occupants of the top offices, Mohammed bin Nayef as crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman as deputy crown prince, and Adel al-Jubeir as foreign minister, are all known for their close ties to US imperialism. The new crown prince is US-educated and has made frequent trips to Washington for consultations on counter-terrorism operations.

He is identified with a more aggressive and interventionist Saudi foreign policy throughout the Middle East, heavily backing the Egyptian military junta of General Sisi, and joining with it to demand the destruction of the Muslim Brotherhood, the conservative bourgeois party that ruled Egypt for one year before the 2013 military coup, whose offshoots play a significant role in many Arab countries.

The two princes will also retain their positions as interior minister and defense minister, respectively, further cementing the ties between King Salman's wing of the royal family and the security forces. In a further effort to bolster the regime, the king ordered a bonus of one month's salary paid to each member of the armed forces and the security police.

King Salman foreshadowed the latest changes immediately upon taking the throne in January, when he abolished more than a dozen advisory councils established by his predecessors and consolidated authority into two new councils. Prince Mohammed bin Nayef was named head of the Council of Political and Security Affairs, while Prince Mohammed bin Salman was named head of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, effectively sharing top-level executive power within the kingdom.

The rapid elevation of the younger prince is tell-tale sign of the decay and crisis of the reactionary Saudi regime. Mohammed bin Salman is one of a handful of the 600 princes of his generation to be educated entirely within the country. He is variously reported to be between 27 and 35, and has no military experience, but heads an agency that was the third-largest purchaser of weapons in the world, behind only the United States and China.

The Saudi press has promoted him heavily as the leader and director of the current intervention in Yemen, a campaign of glorification that has set the stage for his elevation to second in line for the throne. It was Mohammed bin Salman who met Yemeni president Abdurabuh Mansur Hadi at the airport in Riyadh, when he came to seek continuing Saudi support after Houthi rebels forced him to flee the country.

As secretary of the royal court, as well as defense minister, the prince controls access to his 79-year-old father, King Salman, making him the focal point of palace intrigue. There is little doubt that he is also the focal point of animosity from the disfavored branches of the royal family, which have on more than one occasion resorted to violence to settle disputes over positions of power and control of the vast wealth of the oil-rich kingdom.

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