

Saudi Arabia under Salman

King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, 79, succeeded his brother Abdullah on 23 January 2015, immediately confirming Muhammad bin Nayaf as Deputy Crown Prince, third in line to the Saudi throne. In an apparent success for the Sudairi grouping of the vast Al Saud royal family, Salman appears to have ended decades of speculation over the transfer of Saudi leadership from Ibn Saud's sons to his grandsons. However, Salman comes to the throne at a time of regional instability: crises in Yemen, Iraq and Syria, the increasing regional influence of Iran and low oil prices as the Saudis seek to maintain their market share. Salman faces stern tests ahead which will provide excellent experience for the grandsons as they prepare to take over the reins of the Kingdom.

Key Observations

- Salman's reign is likely to see the entrenchment of the Sudairis as the pre-eminent royals, which risks provoking increased internal rivalry with excluded lines
- Internal security concerns will remain a priority for Salman indicated by his appointment of bin Nayaf who is credited with leading an effective internal counter-terrorism campaign and has led the repression of dissent in the Eastern Province
- The regional security agenda will include measures to push back **Islamic State (IS)** from the northern border, but **al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)** will continue to pose a credible threat from the south
- The influence of the grandson's generation will surge as Salman increasingly relies on them to govern due to concerns over his health
- Little will change economically and internationally under the new kingship, with policy continuity paramount

Political Outlook

One of Salman's first rulings, the reshuffling of the Cabinet, aimed to streamline the highest levels of governance and should lead to more proactive governing. The changes are also indicative of Salman using his kingship to cement the second generation of the Sudairis (see box) in the upper echelons of government, in the hope of ensuring their future succession and the continuing dominance of the Al Saud family.

The creation of two super committees in the recent reshuffle benefits the second generation of Sudairis. The functions of the Council of Political and Security Affairs (CPSA) and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA) will be of critical importance. These new bodies will be at the core of King Salman's government and are headed by the next generation of monarchs; CPSA by Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayaf (MbN) and CEDA by Defence Minister Muhammad bin Salman (MbS), the king's son. The leadership of the two super committees will act as a training ground for the senior princes and hints at their central role in the future of the Kingdom. This is likely to be increasingly authoritative considering Salman's health; among other health issues, Salman has suffered a stroke, limiting the use of his arms. MbS's is the more intriguing promotion, having been largely unknown in high politics two years ago. However, in recent years he has emerged as a bureaucratic infighter and astute political manoeuvrer to become his father's political adviser, defence minister and head of the royal court at the age of 34, by far the youngest senior decision-maker in the government. This could be indicative of future advancement for MbS as he uses his new positions to gain further leverage in the Saud dynasty, possibly paving the way to become future king. His inexperience, however, may prove a limitation for such ambitions in the medium-term.

The Sudairis

The Sudairis were a powerful alliance of seven full brothers who used their relationship to create a dominant leadership group within the Al Saud dynasty. The clan consisted of King Fahd, King Salman, Crown Prince Nayaf, Crown Prince Sultan, Prince Turki, Prince Ahmed and Prince Abdel Rahman, all of whom have occupied key ministerial or government posts, but three are now dead and three others retired. All the brothers have established their sons in key positions throughout the government and state apparatus, ensuring the Sudairis will remain influential into the next generations of the dynasty.

In a cabinet reshuffle, Salman removed two of Abdullah's sons from the governorships of Mecca and Riyadh –posts considered to have often launched individuals into more senior roles. However, Mu'taib bin Abdullah, the most prominent son of the former king who was previously viewed as a future monarch, has retained his post as head of the National Guard, an important strategic post formerly held by his father, but one that has declined in influence to be the least powerful of the three ministers commanding military forces. Prince Bandar bin Sultan has also been relieved of his positions as secretary general of the National Security Council and adviser to the king. Bandar was a key figure in Abdullah's court and the reshuffle is indicative of Salman's apparent desire to increase the Sudairi presence in the centre of Saudi politics while removing those who have built powerbases under Abdullah. Retaining Mu'taib highlights the delicate balance that Salman must strike so as not to upset the delicate internal power balance of senior Al Saud relationships. Salman appears to be trying to limit the pool of senior candidates in the second generation in a bid to streamline governance, reduce internal political tensions and ensure the prominence of his own family within the vast dynasty. This is likely to see push-back from excluded senior princes, but is not likely to escalate into serious conflict.

Security Outlook

Salman has not yet spelled out his main foreign policy priorities, but in a reshuffle shortly after assuming power he created the CPSA, a new super committee for security and political issues under the control of MbN. Social stability and internal security are the top priorities for Saudi rulers; increasingly pressing demands amid wider regional upheaval. MbN has been a key player in the repression of political dissent in the kingdom, with little sign that there will be reforms to allow more political and social freedoms. Indeed, he has a reputation for having an intolerant and hardline stance on security matters, making the possibility of political and social reform unlikely. The restive Shi'a population in the Eastern Province will continue to be the focus of internal repression, while female drivers, bloggers and other political activists will also bear the brunt of MbN's continued repressive policies.

Salman is considered to be more socially and religiously conservative than Abdullah. The relatively liberal head of the Religious Police and the Justice Minister have been replaced with more hardline individuals, raising some concern that Abdullah's slow social reforms will be reversed. This does not necessarily indicate a renewed prominence of the religious establishment, whose influence declined under Abdullah, but instead plays into Salman's reputation as a consensus builder. Known liberal Adel al-Teraifi, a former al-Arabiya presenter, has been appointed information minister and has an outlook that is at odds with the clerical establishment. The inclusion of the two ends of the spectrum highlight Salman's desire to have the entire spectrum represented in his government.

Besides the presence of former foreign fighters providing a source of inspiration and battle-hardened individuals, the slick media campaign orchestrated by **Islamic State** (IS) is proving a vital recruitment tool. Saudi Arabian society is one of the highest users of the internet and it is conceivable that many disillusioned young men are being remotely indoctrinated by the group. **AQAP** in neighbouring Yemen has also pledged allegiance to the group and remain a credible threat to Saudi interests. Continued reports of al-Qaeda and IS-affiliated group arrests are expected and new legislation targeting potential self-radicalised individuals, including internet activity legislation, is likely to be presented in the coming months as a means to limit public exposure to IS propaganda. Although the threat to the kingdom posed by the militant groups is a credible one, a successful attack is highly unlikely due to Saudi Arabia's sophisticated intelligence and effective counter-terrorism policies, bolstered by co-operation with the West.

Yemen has long been one of Saudi Arabia's major security concerns and the growing instability there will remain a critical concern under Salman. With Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal remaining in post, continuity of policy is highly likely, although it is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain the Yemen policy strategy due to the complicated web of relationships in the country. Counter-terrorism efforts will remain the top priority. Some economic aid has already been suspended, with further suspensions likely as the Houthis expand their control. Iran is believed to provide some funding to the group and it is therefore out of Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence, with the group unlikely to serve Saudi interests as previous Sana'a regimes have done. The loss of Saudi funds may drive further instability and drive higher cross-border movements, triggering internal security concerns in the Kingdom, likely resulting in increased border force deployments and a crackdown on Yemeni immigrants.

International Relations

Indicating a continuation of oil policy aimed at maintaining the Kingdom's majority market share, on 5 February, Saudi Arabia cut its March oil pricing for Asia. The sale price of Arab Light crude was lowered to USD 2.30 per barrel below the Middle East benchmarks. Due to the shale revolution in the US, China and other Asian nations have become key markets for the kingdom with the refusal to reduce production to address oversupply in the international system indicative of Saudi Arabia's intent to protect its position as the main exporter of crude to China, a promising expanding market. Therefore, production levels are unlikely to decline in the coming months and international oil prices will remain below USD 100.

The West: Despite much hubris in the press following Abdullah's death calling for a recalculation of the relationship with Saudi Arabia due to its alleged human rights abuses, this is highly unlikely as it is not regime change and the important ties between Saudi Arabia and the West, particularly the US, remain unchanged. Saudi Arabia is a staunch counter-terrorism ally and a regional power. Indeed, US-Saudi relations may improve as US President Barack Obama and King Abdullah reportedly struggled to forge a friendship – something that may change under Salman. Furthermore, with Salman being at the front of international engagement for the past two years due to Abdullah's failing health, international relations are highly likely to be characterised by continuity. MbN's visit to Washington in 2014 saw US officials visit him at his residence, highlighting the esteem in which he is held; a positive indication for future US-Saudi relations. Although US-Iran nuclear talks have caused some concern in the kingdom, rapprochement between the two countries will do little to affect the Saudi-US relationship, which is likely to be viewed in a similar vein to the conflicting policies of the US and Saudi towards Israel: i.e., the acceptance of different strategies on some issues.

Iran remains Saudi's primary regional competition, but due to increasing regional cooperation in the face of the IS threat, relations are becoming more cordial. In another sign of a stable transition, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal has retained his portfolio, which he has held for the past forty years, and remains lead envoy on Iranian relations. Saud visited his counterpart in Tehran in 2014, highlighting the improved relations. However, the two regional competitors are likely to continue to confront each other in regional theatres in a bid to gain influence, such as in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. Another consequence of the oil strategy is that Iran will be impacted by economic stagnation due to the low prices, despite some US sanctions being lifted in 2014 as a result of progress in nuclear talks. This will go some way towards curtailing Iran's regional influence as its ability to fund regional proxy groups is lessened.