



King Abdullah dies, Salman's succession marks return of Sudairis

Saudi Arabia's new king, Salman Bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud, has determined where succession will go once it finally passes to the next generation. King Salman wasted no time in appointing his Sudairi nephew Mohammed Bin Nayef deputy crown prince, and has named his son Mohammed defence minister and chief of the Royal Court

King Abdullah Bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud, monarch since August 2005, has died at the age of 90. "With great sadness, Crown Prince Salman Bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud, all members of the family and the nation mourn the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah Bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud as he passed away at exactly one o'clock this morning [23 January]," a statement from the Royal Court broadcast on state television said. World leaders are expected to gather in Riyadh this afternoon for his funeral and in the days ahead; several Arab states have declared periods of mourning.

King Abdullah died at one o'clock in the morning of 23 January, just over three weeks after being admitted to hospital with breathing difficulties. He had been diagnosed with pneumonia over the new year, and the expectation has been that his reign would soon end – as was covered in depth by GSN Issue 985, published on 22 January.

Key developments

- The late King Abdullah's half-brother Salman Bin Abdelaziz is the new king, with Prince Miqrin Bin Abdelaziz as crown prince. Miqrin was the late Abdullah's choice. There are concerns about Salman's health and his capacity to rule.
- King Salman, who comes from the family's powerful Sudairi branch, has already issued a string of decrees. Key is the appointment of Prince Mohammed Bin Nayef (MBN) – son of Salman's late Sudairi brother and former crown prince Nayef Bin Abdelaziz – as deputy crown prince. This seems to answer the central question of where the throne will go once it finally passes to the next generation of Al-Saud.
- Salman has given significant power to his son, Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), naming him defence minister and putting him in charge of the royal court. Many of GSN's sources are highly critical of MBS, and have expressed concerns that he might have too much influence over his father as the latter's health deteriorates.

The senior Al-Saud have had at least three weeks to stake their claims on power in post-Abdullah Saudi Arabia: while the immediate succession was already determined, princes from the

so-called third generation – the grandsons of Ibn Saud – and the branches of the family they represent will have been jostling to secure their positions.

Salman Bin Abdelaziz was immediately named the new king. Salman (see profile below) is in his late 70s, and there are significant concerns about both his physical and mental health. GSN sources suggest that he is not able to function at a high-level without considerable support.

The new king is not expected to make any major policy changes, but he is seen as more of a traditionalist than Abdullah; he also has a reputation for being hard-working, austere, and honest. Salman takes over at a difficult time for Saudi Arabia and the region, with rapidly developing crises just over the border

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King Abdullah Bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud

Born in Riyadh in 1924, Abdullah Bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud's life spanned the history of the kingdom founded in 1932 by his father King Abdelaziz, known as Ibn Saud. With a profound respect for tradition and driven less by material interests than so many other princes (a trait that won him admiration across society), Abdullah instinctively understood the need for a Saudi conception of social justice, promoting change in a kingdom whose economy had transformed in a few decades, but within an ordered social framework.

On his death, western reports immediately cited the king's

'cautious reforms'; activists, meanwhile, took to the airwaves to call for change to accelerate. More subtle commentators observed that Abdullah had skillfully trodden the path between reactionary elements within the Wahhabi establishment, ruling family and wider society, and advocates of transformational change. He had seen the dangers of moving too quickly: his appointment as second deputy prime minister in 1975 immediately followed the assassination of King Faisal.

Abdullah's respect for tradition was reciprocated by Saudi tribes, many of whose leaders became admirers during his long period as commander of the Saudi



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King Abdullah Bin Abdelaziz Al-Saud

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Arabian National Guard (SANG) from 1962 until November 2010. But operating within the confines of Saudi decision-making, he was also sensitive to the need for change. Several major reforms introduced during his rule, from 1 August 2005, had been presaged by initiatives he promoted as crown prince, especially following King Fahd's stroke in 1995, when he acted as effective regent. Diplomatic initiatives such as the early 2003 Arab Charter spoke volumes for his understanding of the Middle East's need to tackle its structural problems. His national dialogue process – also first launched in 2003 – reflected a more inclusive view of promoting reform. That the national dialogue ran out of steam was, in part, a reflection of the monarch's ageing and his central role in promoting the process.

In foreign relations and the near abroad, Abdullah's kingdom faced great challenges. While Al-Qaeda cells were snuffed out within Saudi Arabia, they have flourished across the border in Yemen. Jihadist enemies are making the pace in Syria and Iraq. Abdullah's great regional initiative of a decade ago, rapprochement with Iran, failed – although Tehran's immediate response, sending condolences and saying foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif would travel to Riyadh on 24 January for an "official ceremony", suggest movement is possible.

US President Barack Obama was typically expressive in delivering his sympathies. "As a leader, he was always candid and had the courage of his convictions," he said, adding that one of Abdullah's "convictions was his steadfast and passionate belief in the importance of the US-Saudi relationship as a force for stability and security in the Middle East and beyond". Vice-president Joe Biden is expected soon in Riyadh. But political tensions of recent years with Washington – exacerbated by Abdullah's personal anger at Obama's lack of action to remove President Bashar Al-Assad in Syria – will not easily be lifted with the change of monarch.

Abdullah rose to become king despite his relative modest lineage, when compared to the powerful Sudairis and other claimants. The Al-Abdullah were promoted to key roles, first in the SANG and then across government: Miteb Bin Abdullah is SANG minister, Mishaal Bin Abdullah is Mecca governor and Riyadh governor is Turki Bin Abdullah and Abdelaziz Bin Abdullah is deputy foreign minister; Khalid Bin Abdullah sits on the Allegiance Council (GSN 985/3). Saudi-watchers will be looking to see if they can retain a prominent role.

The late king's impact was sufficient for GSN in December 2005 to publish a special issue entitled *Abdullah reshapes Al-Saud social compact*. This analysed "a complex society shaped by tradition but consumed by change" (GSN 772/1). Saudi "governance and debate must respond to rapid population growth, internet culture, global terrorism and the market economy, but where tribal structures and conservative religious beliefs retain huge importance", the report said.

This was Abdullah's balancing act; it was carried off with considerable aplomb.

After King Abdullah

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in Yemen and Iraq, the ongoing conflict in Syria, deep-running tensions with Iran and questions over Saudi Arabia's role in world oil markets among other policy headaches.

Return of the Sudairis

King Salman comes from the Al-Saud's powerful Sudairi bloc – the group of seven full brothers born to Ibn Saud and Hessa Bint Ahmed Al-Sudairi (see King Salman profile, below). It is this branch of the Al-Saud which seems to have come out on top in the manoeuvring which will have taken place in the weeks and months prior to King Abdullah's death. While Miqrin Bin Abdelaziz has been named crown prince – as decreed by King Abdullah – King Salman has appointed Mohammed Bin Nayef deputy crown prince and second deputy prime minister, positioning MBN to be the first grandson of Ibn Saud to rule Saudi Arabia.

According to King Salman's decree, MBN (see profile below), who also remains interior minister, has the support of a majority of the Allegiance Council, the Al-Saud's representative body that is supposed to determine all issues of succession following King Abdullah's death. (For details on how the council works, see *GSN 985/7*). MBN has long been thought of as a potential successor. Born in 1959, his prominence in Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism programmes has already earned him an international reputation; he made a high-profile visit to Washington in February 2014 (*GSN 964/1*) and in December was back there again, meeting US President Barack Obama (*GSN 985/12*).

His appointment ends any suggestions that Prince Ahmed Bin Abdelaziz, the youngest of the Sudairi seven (but “not the brightest spark”, as a veteran observer put it), could still have a shot at being king.

It also, for now at least, puts a lid on the ambitions of King Abdullah's sons. The late king, who had no full brothers, had put several of his sons in key positions in the past two years, probably with a view to advancing their claims to the throne. Saudi Arabian National Guard minister Prince Miteb Bin Abdullah has in particular been spoken about as a future king, though his military background may have counted against him. Crown Prince Miqrin, who was close to Abdullah, may offer some level of cover for King Abdullah's sons, but his own lack of brothers and the renewed vigour of the Sudairis leave the Al-Abdullah looking somewhat exposed.

Rise of Mohammed Bin Salman

Also set to benefit from the appointment of Salman are the new king's sons. The immediate beneficiary was MBS, who has been named minister of defence (a job previously held by his father) and Royal Court head (replacing the somewhat Machiavellian Khalid Bin Abdelaziz Al-Tuwajiri). MBS has been head of his father's court since March 2013, and – even

without an official government position – his level of influence has often been cited as a matter for concern.

MBS is the eldest of seven sons by Salman's second wife, Fahda Al-Hithlain, whose tribal links have earned him the moniker ‘bedu prince’. Seen as impressive by some, and described as blunt and unsophisticated by others, he is seen as his father's gatekeeper. There is speculation that his power and influence will increase as his father becomes increasingly old or unwell. As well as his new roles, MBS remains minister of state and a member of the cabinet.

LEADERSHIP PROFILES

King Salman Bin Abdelaziz

Crown Prince Salman was born in 1936, and is one of the seven Sudairi brothers – the powerful bloc of full brothers born to Ibn Saud and Hessa Bint Ahmed Al-Sudairi. The so-called Sudairi Seven included King Fahd (who ruled from 1982 to 2005) and two other crown princes Nayef (died 2012), and Sultan (died 2011). Other living Sudairi brothers are Prince Abdelrahman, a former deputy defence minister (1982–2011); Prince Turki, another deputy defence minister (1969–78), who after a controversial marriage spent many years in self-imposed exile in Cairo, returning to Saudi Arabia in 2011 on the death of Sultan; and Prince Ahmed, the youngest of the seven, who was at times talked about as a candidate for succession.

Salman has a reputation for being one of the most austere of the senior Al-Saud, with an appetite for work and a good understanding of the kingdom's tribal structures. He spent a long time as Riyadh governor (1962–2011), during which period the capital was transformed into a modern metropolis, though it is still very poor in parts. In November 2011, he was appointed defence minister on the death of his full brother Sultan.

There have been reports for many years that Salman is suffering from age-related mental health issues, although *GSN* has not seen any verifiable evidence. He had back surgery in 2010, and has had at least one stroke; at times he has been absent from public view, but he also had an active programme of travel in 2014 and often deputised for the king.

Crown Prince Miqrin

Crown Prince Miqrin is a former intelligence chief who was named deputy crown prince in April 2014, a move seen as an attempt by then king Abdullah – to whom Miqrin was close – to shore up his legacy. At 69, Miqrin is the youngest surviving son of Ibn Saud. Sources tell *GSN* he is suffering within the family from his low status: his mother was a Yemeni called Baraka, thought to have been a concubine or slave girl, and, like King Abdullah, he has no recorded full brothers.

Miqrin became a pilot in the mid-1960s, and has degrees in aviation and military science. He was governor of Hail (1980–

Succession in Saudi Arabia

99) and then moved to Medina. In 2005 he was appointed head of the General Intelligence Directorate. When he left that post in summer 2012, he was named adviser and special envoy to the king. He seems to be well-liked by the public and the diplomatic community, though a significant number of members of the Allegiance Council did not support his appointment as deputy crown prince.

Sources say he shares King Abdullah's sensitivity to the need for a more effective, less lavish style of leadership. Official biographies mention his love of astronomy and classical Arabic culture, as well as his interest in agriculture. He is married to Abta Bint Hamoud Al-Rashid, and has many children. His sons – including Princes Abdelaziz, Bandar, Fahd, Faisal, Mansour and Turki – have not been prominent, although they may emerge into the spotlight in view of their father's new status.

MBN deputy crown prince

Interior minister Mohammed Bin Nayef (born in 1959) has been thought of as a contender for the throne for quite some

time. Unlike Miqrin, MBN has a strong bloodline, as both of his parents – the late crown prince Nayef and Jawahar Bint Abdelaziz (from the ruling family's Jiluwi branch) – were members of the Al-Saud. He was initially known for his business dealings, first appearing in western media in 1991 when it was reported he had been awarded a huge contract to import gas masks into Saudi Arabia. He worked in the private sector until around 1990 and in May 1999 was appointed assistant minister of interior for security affairs.

It was in 2003 that he came to prominence, when radical jihadist planner Ali Abdelrahman Al-Ghamdi handed himself over to him. He was subsequently given the rank of minister, in June 2004. He has overseen much of the Saudi terrorist rehabilitation programme since its inception, and narrowly avoided death himself in 2009, when a suicide bomber blew himself up within metres of him. He became interior minister in November 2012, the most senior position to be taken by a member of his generation.

MBN's wife, Reema Bint Sultan, is the daughter of another former crown prince (and Sudairi), Sultan Bin Abdelaziz.

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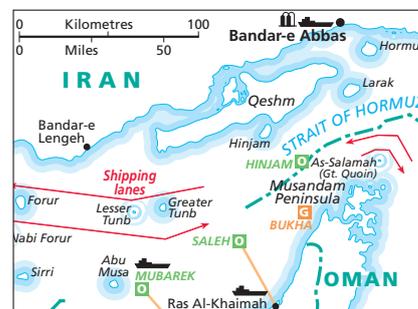
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Saudi Arabia after King Fahd: Abdullah seizes the moment ([GSN 763/4](#), September 2005)

Abdullah reshapes Al-Saud social compact ([GSN 772/1](#), December 2005, special issue on Saudi Arabia in the year Abdullah took the throne)

Opposition strategies confused in Abdullah's Saudi Arabia ([GSN 777/1](#), March 2006)

Imposing discipline abroad, king sets Saudi foreign policy line ([GSN 823/1](#), February 2008)

Abdullah concerned to build consensus as Al-Saud leaders edge further towards reform ([GSN 835/1](#), September 2008)

Messages of tolerance and modernisation from Abdullah's reshuffle, but sectarian tensions persist ([GSN 848/1](#), February 2009)

SUCCESSION QUESTIONS

SPECIAL REPORT: Politics, succession and risk in Saudi Arabia (January 2010 – Extracts available in [GSN 866/1](#))

With Allegiance Committee, circles of power evolve in Saudi Arabia ([GSN 792/1](#), October 2006)

King Abdullah prepares Al-Saud for a generational leap (December 2007)

Who's who in the Saudi Allegiance Committee ([GSN 820/1](#), December 2007)

Saudi succession issues surface once more as Sultan rests after US medical trip ([GSN 845/1](#), January 2009)

Political caution accompanies social reform as King Abdullah keeps establishment on side ([GSN 858/1](#), July 2009)

All eyes on kingdom as Abdullah's absence sparks speculation on circles of power and influence ([GSN 890/1](#), November 2010)

Protests and debate reflect increasing freedoms in Abdullah's kingdom ([GSN 882/1](#), August 2010)

Attrition among ageing senior leadership will force third-generation princes up Al-Saud hierarchy ([GSN 925/1](#), June 2012)

Prince Khalid sacked as King Abdullah continues to clear out the old guard ([GSN 945/1](#), April 2013)

King Abdullah installs son as Riyadh governor, shakes up military ([GSN 970/1](#), May 2014)

CROWN PRINCE SALMAN

Al-Saud move with speed to reconfigure top team after Nayef's death ([GSN 926/1](#), June 2012)

DEPUTY CROWN PRINCE MIQRIN

Second-generation Miqrin moves up ranks of Saudi succession ([GSN 940/1](#), February 2013)

Miqrin Bin Abdelaziz named deputy crown prince ([GSN 967/1](#), April 2014)

MOHAMMED BIN NAYEF

Watershed moment as Mohammed Bin Nayef named Saudi interior minister ([GSN 935/4](#), November 2012)

Mohammed Bin Nayef takes a lead role on Syria ([GSN 965/4](#), March 2014)

MITEB BIN ABDULLAH

All eyes on kingdom as Abdullah's absence sparks speculation ([GSN 890/1](#), November 2010)

Miteb named minister as Sang upgraded ([GSN 948/5](#), June 2013)

LATE CROWN PRINCE SULTAN

Sultan health fears add impetus to Saudi elite politicking ([GSN 828/1](#), May 2008)

Death of Saudi crown prince and King Abdullah's health issues highlight downside of gerontocracy ([GSN 911/1](#), October 2011)

The old guard reconfigures with Salman as defence minister and KBS as deputy ([GSN 912/1](#), November 2011)

LATE CROWN PRINCE NAYEF

Security veteran Nayef is the coming man, but not yet an assured successor in Saudi Arabia ([GSN 851/1](#), April 2009)

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