The perils of the transfer of power in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

The Saudi leadership feels threatened, first of all by Shi’ite Iran, but also by the extremist Islamic State (IS), the Muslim Brotherhood and even liberal intellectuals. Low oil prices cause growing deficits, while youth unemployment remains huge. Is the House of Saud on the verge of collapse? This paper first addresses the recent succession, as a result of which new King Salman’s young son, Muhammad bin Salman, accumulated unparalleled power. It asks whether his ambitious plans to modernize the Saudi economy can save the kingdom or if his fast rise will unleash a power struggle. This paper also looks at the war in Yemen which Muhammad bin Salman started and that might deepen the already problematic state of the Saudi economy. Finally, it explores a number of scenarios from muddling through to total implosion.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Saudi Arabia; House of Saud; succession; Muhammad bin Salman; Muhammad bin Nayef; Islamic State (IS); scenarios

Compared with the relatively cautious reign of King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (1923–2015), his appointed successor and half-brother, King Salman (taking office in January 2015), has chosen a much more active role, both inside and outside Saudi Arabia. Responsibility for this sudden change of mind is largely attributed to his ambitious young son, Prince Muhammad bin Salman (b. c.1985) – also known as ‘MbS’ – who instantly after his father’s succession – to the surprise of many – was appointed Minister of Defense and economic supremo. A few months later he was also designated Deputy Crown Prince.

This fast-rising star is considered to be the mastermind of the war Saudi Arabia unexpectedly instigated in March 2015 against Shiite Houthi rebels in neighbouring Yemen – which Riyadh predicted to be won in a matter of a few months, but which proved to be a quagmire and is continuing in August 2016. Saudi Arabia’s motive for starting and continuing the war is the ever-growing rivalry with Shiite neighbour Iran, which is accused of empowering the Houthis (although international experts doubt this). At the same time MbS is trying to reduce Saudi Arabia’s reliance on its oil wealth. His grandiose and risky master plan ‘Vision 2030’ aims to modernize and (partly) privatize the Saudi economy, and get millions unemployed young Saudis a job.
The succession

On the surface the succession went smoothly. King Abdullah was immediately succeeded as king and prime minister by the former Minister of Defense and Deputy Prime Minister Crown Prince Salman bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (b. 1935). However, it is widely believed that the new king is unlikely to remain on the throne for any length of time; not only is he nearly 80 years old but also there are persistent rumours that he is suffering from serious health problems.

Salman was the regime’s lead fundraiser for jihadis in Afghanistan in the 1980s and in Bosnia during the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s. He is also known for his notorious remarks after 9/11, when he informed the US Ambassador in Riyadh that the attacks were a ‘Zionist conspiracy’.¹ He made the same allegation after Saudi Arabia’s support for the Islamist fighters in Afghanistan and the Balkans backfired when jihadists returned home and initiated a wave of terrorist attacks in the kingdom; these jihadists, the prince maintained, were ‘supported by extreme Zionism whose aim is to limit the Islamic call’.²

Prior to his death, King Abdullah had already made arrangements to ensure that his preferred candidate would eventually succeed Salman as king. In March 2014, somewhat unexpectedly, Abdullah issued a decree in which he formally nominated Prince Muqrin bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (b. 1945), youngest living son of Ibn Saud, as ‘crown prince to the crown prince’. It is true that Prince Muqrin had held the post of second deputy prime minister (a sort of ‘crown prince in waiting’) since February 2013. But by formally appointing Muqrin as ‘vice crown prince’ Abdullah tried to curtail Salman’s power to appoint his own successor after he became king. Indeed, after Abdullah’s death was announced, Prince Muqrin was immediately appointed crown prince.

What was much more interesting at the time was the appointment of Prince Muhammad bin Nayef bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (b. 1959) as the new deputy crown prince. He stayed on as minister of interior, a post occupied by his father for many years, the then Crown Prince Nayef bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (d. 2012). In the person of Prince Muhammad a new generation of princes finally reached the highest summit of power.

So on first sight everything had been arranged to guarantee a peaceful transition of power and continuation of a prudent domestic and foreign course in the kingdom. But after barely three months Muqrin stepped down as crown prince, to be replaced by Muhammad bin Nayef. As stated above, the king’s young son, MbS, was appointed deputy crown prince in his place. Since then, under the surface, some signs are visible of tension between the two Muhammads. And while any disaffected princes – Muqrin, for instance, or highly placed sons of Abdullah who immediately after the death of their father were fired – have remained quiet thus far, there is no certainty that calm will prevail. And there are certainly enough among the thousands of princes who consider themselves eligible for the kingship to foresee trouble in the years ahead.

Thirty-six sons

The founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud (1876–1953), was married 22 times while still adhering to the Islamic tradition of not having more than four wives at any one time. All these marriages bore fruit and he sired plenty of children. Nobody knows the
exact number, but the most reliable sources speak of 36 sons and 21 daughters (e.g., Stenslie 2012). All these children, in turn, married various times and this has raised the total number of family members to around 7000–8000 princes and princesses. Exactly how many is a well-guarded state secret.

The male descendants – they are, of course, the only ones who are relevant in this context – are divided into 35 family branches, but not all these are suitably qualified to occupy the highest position in the country. One important criterion is the origin of the mother, who must, for instance, be an Arab. Ibn Saud had married a considerable number of non-Arabs and that reduced the number of contenders straightaway. Sons of Yemenite or Lebanese mothers are also generally viewed as ranking low in the hierarchy – although this did not seem to matter in the case of Prince Muqrin, who has a Yemenite mother. All in all, this meant that of the sons of Ibn Saud who are still alive, only 13 were candidates to ascend to the throne, at least on paper. After Salman became king, Muqrin resigned and Muhammad bin Nayef became crown prince, the remaining 11 have effectively been sidelined. It will be the third generation that will take over after Salman.

A family quarrel

Theoretically, one or other of Ibn Saud’s sidelined sons could bounce back. But they are old. More to the point is whether their sons, the third generation, will acquiesce in the present plans. And that is anything but certain. Some speculate that the stage may be set for a real political fight within the family for the first time in decades.3

The past 50 years have passed with relatively few problems, but that was not always the case and there is no guarantee that it will remain so in future. Disasters have occurred before. The second Saudi state (1824–91) disintegrated because the brothers Abdullah bin Faisal and Saud bin Faisal could not agree about the succession. A third party, the Rashid tribe, made use of the vacuum, occupied Riyadh, and forced the Al Saud family into exile. This catastrophe made a deep impression on the generations that followed and particularly on the founder of the present kingdom, Ibn Saud. Half a century after the war within the family he summoned his two oldest sons, Saud and Faisal, to his deathbed. ‘Join hands across my body,’ he told them, and ‘swear that you will work together when I am gone. Swear too, that if you quarrel, you will argue in private. You must not let the world catch sight of your disagreements’ (House 2012, 210).

Their father’s warning fell on deaf ears. Ibn Saud was hardly buried before the two princes started to quarrel. There was every reason for this, as the successor, Saud, was a wastrel who was totally unfit to rule. Towards the end of the 1950s the country was as good as bankrupt, despite soaring oil revenues. Slowly but surely, Prince Faisal gained actual power in the teeth of fierce opposition from his half-brother. In 1963 their quarrel almost led to civil war, but a year later Saud finally admitted defeat – after Faisal had managed to persuade the ulama to issue a fatwa supporting his claim to the throne.

The following successions – from Faisal (1964–75) to Khaled, from Khaled (1975–82) to Fahd, and from Fahd (1982–2005) to Abdullah – occurred without any open bickering. The actual transfer of rule is perilous, however, to put it mildly.
Rivalry behind the scenes

In 2007 King Abdullah set up the Allegiance Council, consisting of 34 descendants of Ibn Saud, including a number of his grandsons. In theory, this body would decide who would be the new crown prince after his death. This rule had already been broken with the appointment of Prince Muqrin in 2014 as ‘crown prince to the crown prince’, and though the Allegiance Council ratified the present succession, it does not seem to have played any other role. Indeed, some observers saw this council from the start largely as a clever ruse by Abdullah to neutralize his prominent Sudairi brothers (al-Ibrahim 2014; Mouline 2010). The latter are the seven sons from the marriage of Ibn Saud and Hassa bint Ahmad Al Sudairi, who comes from an influential clan in the Nejd, the central region of Saudi Arabia. The brothers and their descendants formed a ‘family within the family’ and have held crucial positions in the state apparatus for many years.

By institutionalizing the succession, Abdullah aimed to reduce the dominance of the Sudairi group. In recent years, he also removed various Sudairis from their posts, replacing them with his own confidants. His own sons, Mitaib bin Abdullah, Abd al-Aziz bin Abdullah, Turki bin Abdullah and Mishal bin Abdullah, were also given key positions (Commander of the National Guard, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Governor of Riyadh and governor of Mecca respectively) (Kéchichian 2014). Slowly but surely the position of the Sudairis was eroded, with the exception of the Nayef and Salman branches of the family.

Generally behind the scenes, but occasionally more publicly, rivalry grew between the sons of Abdullah, Salman and Nayef (d. 2012). Of these sons, Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud seemed for a time to be the least likely candidate for the succession, not least because of the odour of corruption that surrounds him. The real contest was seen at the time as being between Muhammad bin Nayef and Mitaib bin Abdullah.

The prince of counter-terrorism

Since 1999 Muhammad bin Nayef (nicknamed ‘MbN’) was deputy minister to his father at the Interior Ministry, and since November 2012 he has occupied his father’s position. That appointment was the first serious indication that Saudis of the third generation were being readied for the highest office. MbN is generally viewed as the architect of the successful anti-terrorism programme in the post-2003 years, which earned him in Washington the title of ‘Prince of counter-terrorism’. He cut al-Qaeda down to size in Saudi Arabia, after which the organization fled to Yemen. ‘The prince has built himself an impressive reputation in this area and that is what counts for the regime,’ says Saudi sociologist Khaled al-Dakhil. He goes on to add, ‘By coincidence this is also something that the Americans appreciate’ (quoted in Carey 2013). In his role as interior minister, MbN is chief of police of the notorious secret service (the Mabahith), of many special units and counter-terrorism commando brigades, of the border police and of the mutawwa. He is ‘one of the few who can say that he has shed his own blood for his country,’ says Emirati political analyst Sultan al-Qassemi, ‘and that is a claim that is hard to match’ (Riyadh Bureau n.d.). Al-Qassemi is referring here to an al-Qaeda suicide attempt in 2009 in which the prince was slightly wounded.
On the other hand, Prince Muhammad is the father of the new, strict anti-terrorism law of February 2014, which criminalizes not only violent extremism but also peaceful dissent as terrorism. Under his ministry liberal activists have been sentenced to long prison terms. A notorious example is liberal blogger Raif Badawi, who has been sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1000 lashes for insulting Islam. The prince holds hardline religious views and a friend of his once claimed his office still hires ultra-conservative religious figures (Al Bawaba News 2015). Meanwhile, the prince has also been put in charge of the sensitive Syria portfolio.

For a long time Mitaib bin Abdullah (b. 1952) was also considered a rising star. His career has largely been in the National Guard, a paramilitary force that does not fall under the Ministry of Defense. Initially its most important task was to protect the House of Saud against the threat of a coup; it was later also given the task of defending strategic locations, such as Mecca and Medina. The late Abdullah was himself the commander of the National Guard for 47 years and, besides his military activities, he also set up an extensive civil apparatus, including schools, housing projects and specialist hospitals. In November 2010 Mitaib took over responsibility for the National Guard from his father, which he then proceeded to reorganize drastically, even momentarily mooting the idea of setting up a female sector. In May 2013 the king upgraded the National Guard to the level of an independent ministry, indicating that Mitaib’s standing had increased significantly. Analysts saw this as an attempt by Abdullah to manoeuvre his son into a favourable position for the succession later on.5

The two Muhammads

But this was not to be. When the king died, his sons were more or less marginalized, whereas the sons of Nayef and Salman took the more important positions. Prince Turki bin Abdulla b. 1971) and Prince Mishal bin Abdullah (b. c.1970) were fired as governors of Riyadh and Mecca respectively (as were most of Abdullah’s men in the Council of Ministers). Prince Mitaib has kept his ministry, for now, but he takes a secondary position in one of the two new super councils that were created in the cabinet under the authority of King Salman. One council oversees political and security affairs, and is led by Crown Prince and Minister of Interior Muhammad bin Nayef. The other deals with economic and development issues and is presided over by Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Prince Muhammad, who is very young by Saudi standards, was in January 2015 also named Chief of the royal court, a position wielding huge influence as it controls access to his father’s palace, but left this post in April 2015.

Muhammad bin Nayef was considered as having emerged as the most powerful figure during the first stage of the transition from second- to third-generation princes of the House of Saud. He was initially the best known of these two Muhammads because of his vigorous role in the struggle against Islamic terrorism and as an ally of the United States. But fairly soon analysts started to point at the growing role of the king’s son, Muhammad, who became a special advisor to his father in 2009 – when only 24 years old – when he was Governor of Riyadh and continued in the same role when Salman was appointed Minister of Defense in 2011.6 Apart from his role in the war in Yemen and his radical economic transformation plan Vision 2030, Prince Muhammad, who holds a BA in law and is rumoured to be the king’s favourite son, is said by some to be
the brain behind the more than one shake-up of the power structure. Also Muhammad bin Salman’s big-spending ministry is an important one, which has traditionally been in the hands of the Crown Prince. In recent meetings in Riyadh and Jeddah we heard him described in positive terms: ‘determined’, ‘purposeful’, ‘business-like’.

‘Sensitive and timely changes’

Will these two men cooperate, or will a fully fledged power struggle erupt between them? And there are many more currently unanswerable questions. Will the elder brothers of Muhammad bin Salman accept being passed over as their younger brother is growing ever more powerful? Or will the sons of the late King Abdullah rebel against their unexpected demotion? And what happens if Muhammad bin Salman’s plans to reboot the Saudi economy – and necessarily also radically change its conservative ways if only as he wants to draw more women to the work floor – fail? It is much too early now to predict an outcome one way or the other, but in any case failure cannot be ruled out.

Quite another, but also very important, question is whether there are any reform-minded individuals among these powerful princes who might be willing to offer a bigger voice to the growing numbers of emancipated citizens. We know little or nothing about this – Muhammad bin Salman’s plans for now are silent on political change – yet in the long-term the monarchy will only survive if far-reaching reforms are carried out. It was the – admittedly cautious – reforming approach of King Abdullah that held his country together.

The current king, as Governor of Riyadh in 2007, came out against the imposition of democracy, according to a telegram to the State Department by the then US Ambassador, published by WikiLeaks. ‘Changes have to be introduced in a sensitive and timely manner,’ he said. Democracy is indeed a far-fetched concept in the kingdom. The Ministers of Justice and of Islamic Affairs he appointed after he took office are known as more conservative than their predecessors, if this is anything to go by. But in the end, no king will be able to turn back the clock to stagnation and strengthen repression – and get away with it.

The possible fall of the House of Saud is no foregone conclusion, but …

The House of Saud feels under siege. One indication is its alarmist warnings against the supposed advances of its Shiite rival Iran and against Tehran’s plots in the Sunni Arab world. The military intervention against Houthi rebels in Yemen, launched in March 2015, in this respect, can be seen as a headlong rush forward. Another indication of its state of mind is its attitude to the Muslim Brotherhood, the vehicle of a rival, revolutionary and – judging by its electoral successes in the Arab world after 2011 – popular Islamic ideology. This is why the Saudi regime was so enthusiastic a supporter of the military coup in Egypt that put an end to the elected government of President Mohamed Morsi, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood party in July 2013. And this also explains its decision in February 2014 to label the Brotherhood a terrorist organization, with suitably severe sentences for anyone supporting it in word or deed.

However, it was not just Iran or the Brotherhood that the authorities see as a serious threat: young Saudis who had gone to fight against the regime in Syria are also being
arrested. The government initially discouraged militants from taking part in this struggle, but at the same time no attempt was made in practice to prevent them from going to Syria. Priority was given to bringing about Assad’s downfall.

Thousands of Saudis did indeed depart for Syria, urged on in part by clerics who promoted the struggle against the Syrian regime to the status of a ‘holy war’. Most of them joined organizations that have no time for the hereditary monarchy. Saudi authorities, of course, had experience with the jihadi veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, who in 2003 launched an armed struggle against the monarchy. But it took a while before it finally dawned on the Saudi Arabian authorities that these young combatants too presented a potential threat when they return from Syria. Under the new, severe, anti-terror legislation, combatants returning from Syria, since 2014, are faced with long jail sentences.

Notwithstanding these measures, a first jihadi ‘blowback’ occurred in the Eastern Province in November 2014; later terror attacks followed in May and August 2015. In July 2015 Saudi security forces arrested 431 alleged extremists. Saudi Arabia also joined the US-led coalition against the Islamic State (IS), although its air force was, from March 2015 onwards, more active in Yemen than in Iraq or Syria. IS, which claimed the attacks of May and August, is indeed openly opposed to the Saudi monarchy which it considers un-Islamic. After mass executions in Saudi Arabia in January 2016, when apart from Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr dozens of Sunni extremists were also executed, IS threatened to attack Saudi prisons.

According to analysts inside the kingdom there exists among some young Saudis sympathy for the ideology of IS, which is, after all, close to Wahhabi beliefs. How much sympathy there is exactly remains unclear – Saudis we interviewed estimated between 5% and 20–30% of the population. A prominent Saudi businessman/journalist said emphatically: ‘every family counts at least one IS-sympathizer or Daeshi’, an acronym of the IS Arabic name which is used in derogatory terms by many of its detractors.9

Besides Iran, the Muslim Brothers and Syria veterans, there is a fourth category that is seen as a potential danger and which has become the target of persecution, namely that of human rights activists. Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, many non-violent activists have been arrested and given long prison sentences. They include university professors and lawyers who have been campaigning against human rights violations and advocating political reforms, such as the drafting of a constitution, the holding of free elections and introducing genuine transparency in government. Though unlikely, they could try to take over the lead of the currently unorganized mass of young people who vent their dissatisfaction on social media.

**Muddling through**

What are the potential scenarios for the near future or the medium-term? Even though the monarchy already feels vulnerable, Iran, Muslim Brothers, Syria veterans and human rights activists do not pose an existential threat – at least in the foreseeable future. It is true that the country is run by an elderly political elite – Muhammad bin Salman excepted – and that its economy is (for now) inflexible. But oil dollars can still purchase loyalty, as happened in the first months of the Arab Spring. It is true that this might become increasingly difficult if oil prices do not soon recover and the hopeless war in Yemen, which costs
billions of dollars, continues. Also the support for President Sisi’s regime in Egypt and for rebel groups in Syria is a heavy load for the Saudi Treasury. Furthermore, and more importantly, life under the Al Saud may seem preferable compared with the wretched situation in other Arab countries. When interviewed, many Saudis say that they would like to see changes take place. ‘But,’ they always add, ‘not in the way it happened in Tunisia where the transition is developing slowly and painfully, or as has happened in Egypt and Libya, with their ongoing instability.’ And they would definitely not reject the status quo if it meant ending up like Syria with its horrendous civil war.

**Social explosion**

Nobody can be certain, but a lengthy recession in the oil market, whatever caused it, could spell an end to the Saudi monarchy. If oil prices do not recover, revenues will no longer be sufficient to fund extensive domestic sweeteners. In the medium-term, the kingdom needs – according to some estimates – a budget breakeven price of US$175 per barrel in 2025. The pursuit of business as usual without serious reforms and with constantly increasing government outlays will only exacerbate existing economic and social problems and could easily lead to a social explosion. Karen Elliot House describes the mentality of the current, elderly political elite as being like a ‘rabbit caught in the headlights’. Energetic Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is trying to breathe life into the petrified economy, but it is for now impossible to say whether he will succeed – and there are clearly serious doubts he will. It will indeed be extremely difficult to force a deeply conservative society like Saudi Arabia’s to change direction.

**Reforms or the king’s dilemma**

If the government genuinely started to listen to its citizens, this could also give rise to new problems. History teaches us that kings or emirs who embark on the path of reform may end up with an unpleasant surprise. Reforms tend to lead a life of their own – a subject that Alexis de Tocqueville (1856) wrote about in *L’ancien régime et la révolution*. Was the guillotine not Louis XVI’s reward for his modest reforms? The American political scientist Samuel Huntington later coined the phrase ‘The king’s dilemma’ to describe this phenomenon (Huntington 1968).

A similar course of events took place under the Shah of Iran after he introduced his land reforms in 1963 (the ‘White Revolution’). The king of Bahrain also unintentionally reinforced the Shiite opposition movement by promising concessions. Permitting a minimum degree of political pluralism has put the monarchy in jeopardy and the political crisis in Bahrain has not been resolved, despite Saudi Arabia’s propping up of the Al Khalifa regime, including a direct military intervention in 2011.

In Saudi Arabia itself, Crown Prince Fahd gave a striking instance of the king’s dilemma at the end of the 1970s when he stated that ‘Once we embark on this path, there will be no coming back. In the end we will have to face direct elections – nobody says we have to do that now’ (Lacey 2010, 48–49).

Another variation on this scenario is that the king or influential princes would bow to the often-heard call for more transparent government. Any move in this direction would, however, be blocked by internal opposition within the royal family, because it would
reduce the influence of the Saudis in affairs of state. It might easily provoke resistance from other more conservative factions in the royal family which, in turn, would lead to a serious crisis with unpredictable consequences.

Severe repression

Over the years protests from various elements in society have swelled, sometimes provoking the exasperation of the political and religious establishment. It is possible that this exasperation will at a certain point take the form of a backlash with all forms of social and political protest being prohibited or crushed. It would not be the first time that this has happened. In the early 1990s, for instance, King Fahd did just that with his ruthless assault on the Islamic Reform Movement. A comparable development is perfectly conceivable at present. Take the open criticism by influential preachers such as Salman al-Awda, who are calling on the government to listen to the voice of the people. It is unlikely that al-Awda will put up with being gagged. Will he be imprisoned yet again, as happened in the 1990s? And would that not result in his supporters going on to the streets?

It is true that there has been an increase in the repression of the opposition, but on the whole the response of the Saudi authorities has not been especially violent, with the exception of its treatment of the Shiite protests in the Eastern Province. This is certainly the case if one compares it with many other Arab countries. Incidents, however, can occur unpredictably and might trigger an unstoppable chain reaction. Another catastrophic flood in Jeddah or elsewhere in the country, with a large number of casualties, for instance, might be such an occasion. Or should the price of a litre of petrol suddenly shoot up and people started plundering petrol stations.

Total implosion

The final scenario is that the country will implode. Saudi Arabia is unique among the nations in that it offers hardly any channels for participation by ordinary citizens, while not having any tradition of non-violent protest either. In a crisis situation, as in each of the scenarios described above, the risk is always present that differences of opinion will become so exacerbated that they may even lead to armed struggle. Violent opposition would be nothing new. This occurred in 1929 (the rebellion of the Ikhwan) and in 1979 (occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca) and in the post-2003 period when jihadis declared war on the state.

If the central authority should cease to function, a great number of differences will emerge that have until now largely simmered under the surface, kept within bounds by the popularity of the monarchy. Rival princes will then also go public and ‘the family will no longer be a fist, but five different fingers’.11

Just suppose that the House of Saud falls and that the princes flee abroad in large numbers. The country would disintegrate, with the western region of Hejaz declaring autonomy from the rest. The east, with its oil fields, would come under Iranian influence and the centre would become a bastion of jihadis. Chaos and total upheaval would be the order of the day.

Even if Islamic extremists were to take power, they will also have to sell oil – you cannot drink it after all. The countries that would normally purchase it, however, would at the
least feel grave doubts about a regime that would not automatically make it their priority to
earn billions of dollars in oil exports to the infidel West. The price of oil would go through
the roof, which would be a devastating blow for recovering Western economies and would
also affect economic growth in the East. The price of a litre of petrol would rise
spectacularly.

The shock effect in the region and in the rest of the world would be enormous. No emir
or king in the entire Gulf region would feel safe any longer. Bahrain would probably be the
first to fall, followed by the other Gulf states. Oil revenues would go to revolutionary
movements elsewhere in the Arab world, and one regime after another would topple.
The position of Israel would also become precarious.

A scenario like this is very unlikely at the time of writing, but in the long run a com-
bination of factors such as described above can easily come about. It is no more unlikely
than that the Saud dynasty will survive forever. Few experts foresaw the fall of the Berlin
Wall, or that of the Shah of Iran or of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. The fall of the House of
Saud is certainly no foregone conclusion, but the ingredients for an upheaval of this kind
are certainly present.

Notes

2. See http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/27/king-salmans-shady-history-saudi-arabia-jihi-
dities/.
3. See https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2015-02-02/saudi-arabias-game-
thrones.
4. For more on the succession issue, see Riedel (2014), Herb (2014), Aziz (2014) and Henderson
5. See http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/saudi-transition-kings-sons-well-
place.html#; http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/reshufflings-saudi-defense-
   ministry-abdullah.html/.
6. See http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/profiles/2015/01/27/Profile-Prince-Mohammed-
   bin-Salman-bin-Abdulaziz-Al-Saud.html/.
   2015/02/03/6b35c8b8-abec-11e4-abe8-e1ef60ca26de_story.html/.
8. See https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07RIYADH651_a.html/.
9. For recent estimates, see Tabah Foundation (2016).
10. The author has made grateful use here of House (2012).
11. Interview with a high-ranking employee of Aramco, March 2013.

Disclosure statement

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