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Intrigue Surrounding Saudi Arabia's Succession Masks Looming Strategic Dangers

By Chris Zambelis

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Despite all of the surrounding hype, the recent death of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and the subsequent succession of his half-brother King Salman bin Abdelaziz Al Saud culminated in anti-climax. Reports about an impending crisis of succession between competing factions led by the so-called "Sudairi Clan" (also referred to as the "Sudairi Seven") – the surviving members of the seven sons of the Kingdom's founder King Abdulaziz Ibn Al Saud and his favorite wife, Hassa bin Ahmed al-Sudairi – and an alliance of rival branches within the royal family that threatened to destabilize the kingdom proved to be overblown.

King Salman's status as one of the surviving members of the Sudairi Clan has ensured the return of this powerful bloc to a position of dominance in Saudi politics. King Abdullah, who was not part of the Sudairi Clan, acted to diminish the faction's influence through the cultivation of rival alliances within the royal family and mechanisms such as the Allegiance Council, a consultative body that was designed to help determine lines of succession to the throne. Deputy Crown Prince Muqrin Abdelaziz, who himself was touted as a possible successor to King Abdullah, was elevated to Crown Prince and heir to the throne while Interior Minister Muhammed bin Nayef

was appointed to the positions of Deputy Crown Prince and Second Deputy Premier. King Salman also removed a number of notable advisors and other prominent figures appointed by the late King Abdullah during his tenure to further consolidate his hold on the throne.

It is easy to become engrossed in the machinations of intra-family royal court politics in Saudi Arabia. An honest appraisal of the state of the kingdom suggests that the most pertinent repercussions of Saudi Arabia's transition were overlooked by analysts in favor of the personality feuds and intrigue that we have come to associate with palace politics. The kingdom's continued reliance on an antiquated hereditary succession model relative to the growing demands for political liberalization and democratization being witnessed around the Arab world is just one among a host of issues that have received short shrift. This is the case despite the fact that the entrenched authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia has amplified or has otherwise been responsible for the host of severe social, political, economic, demographic, security, and cultural challenges that confront the kingdom.

In a region beset by disorder and upheaval, it is understandable why the prospect of political change in Saudi Arabia has drawn so much scrutiny. It is hard to overestimate Saudi Arabia's geopolitical significance as the world's largest exporter of oil and the second largest overall producer of oil. The kingdom also boasts the world's largest known oil reserves with around 16 percent of total proven reserves. Just as important, Saudi Arabia commands the world's largest spare oil production capacity. In a world economy fueled by hydrocarbon energy, there should be no surprise why so many observers remain fixated on the potential repercussions of political change in the kingdom. For its part, Saudi Arabia has traditionally leveraged its position as the world's preeminent oil producer alongside its strategic alliance with the United States as a guarantee of its sovereignty and security in light of numerous regional and international threats.

The kingdom has also drawn from its self-anointed religious legitimacy as the Custodian of the Two Holy Cities, a reference to Islam's two holiest mosques – Masjid al-Haram (Grand Mosque) at Mecca and Masjid al-Nabawi (Prophet's Mosque) in Medina – to justify its authority within Saudi Arabia, as well as among Arabs and Muslims worldwide. Riyadh continues to leverage this perceived legitimacy in the face of domestic, ideological, and geopolitical challenges to its rule.

By all accounts, the largely unremarkable transition process that ensued following King Abdullah's death put its principal benefactor in Washington and global oil consumers and energy analysts at ease. In light of the political turbulence that continues to shake the wider Arab world, Saudi Arabia has reassured its allies and partners, led by the U.S., that Riyadh is committed to maintaining a trajectory of stability. However, in today's rapidly changing Middle East these

qualities no longer carry the weight that they once did. The scale of Saudi Arabia's domestic problems requires tangible and genuine reforms, not the preservation of a flawed status quo.