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The House of Saud is preparing for a ‘battle royale’

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For monarchies, wars of succession appear to be a regular phenomenon. While the House of Saud has largely succeeded in maintaining a smooth system of succession, its internal strength seems to be eroding as the new generation of princes starts eyeing kingship.

While Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the current Saudi defense minister, deputy crown prince and son of King Salman, is believed to be the most powerful person in Saudi Arabia, he is not the lawful heir.

In 2015, according to the tradition, Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, the youngest of the sons of the Kingdom’s founder, Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud (Ibn Saud), became the Crown Prince.

However, after April 29, 2015, when King Salman changed the scheme of succession, his nephew Muhammad bin Nayef Al Saud, the current interior minister who has no heir and therefore is unable to pass power to his son, became the heir.

While Nayef is the declared and lawful heir, it is the recently invented position of “deputy crown prince” that has put Prince Muhammad bin Salman in confrontation with the Crown prince.

Although this particular position does not make Muhammad bin Salman a direct claimant to the throne, it certainly has put him in a position to act as the *de facto* king due to the current king’s inability (illness) to perform his functions.

Prince Muhammad may be only the second in succession but the powers he has amassed are telling the untold: his ambition to become the new king much sooner than he is legally entitled to.

What has added to this political tension is that King Salman has tried to obtain the approval of the succession board to bypass Mohammed bin Nayef in the line of succession.

Members of the board, most of them being elder princes and king’s close relatives, are considered far too conservative to agree on breaking with the tradition regarding succession to the throne. However, some of them are said to have agreed to do so presumably for “the best interests of the state” in the wake of external crisis, especially the war in Yemen that owes its existence, first and foremost, to Prince Muhammad’s own aggressive regional policies.

In addition to being defense minister, Mohammed bin Salman heads the kingdom’s main economic coordinating council as well as a body overseeing Saudi Aramco, the state oil company which is the world’s biggest petroleum exporter.

Mohammed bin Salman is clearly amassing extraordinary power and influence very quickly, and his position clearly reveals the current king’s preference for him. This is bound to unsettle his rivals, say some diplomats who have the experience of working in the country and are familiar with the monarchy’s internal dynamics.

On the other hand, the ‘battle royal’ over succession clearly indicates the direction Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy is heading toward. While Mohammed bin Salman has emerged as a hero due to his war against the Houthis in Yemen, a Shia cleric’s execution in Saudi Arabia has equally elevated bin Nayef’s status in the eyes of the public as well as his friends both at home and abroad.

It would not be wrong to contend that while Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen and its rivalry with Iran are linked with the country’s larger regional strategy, the contending princes seem to be using this strategic scenario to project their own influence and boost their stated and yet-unstated claims to kingship.

As such, given Saudi Arabia’s intricate military engagement in the Middle East and the current trajectory of its relations with its decades-old chief ally, the United States, this struggle for power is likely to be taken very seriously not only by Gulf-Arab states but also by the US.

The US is less enthusiastic about Prince Muhammad. And although bin Muhammad compares himself to Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, he is not as enamored with the West as his older rival is.

Foreign intelligence services have questioned his decision-making ability. In December, the BND, Germany's intelligence agency, publicly released an extraordinary and scathing analysis of bin Salman, saying he is behind the kingdom's "impulsive policy of intervention." The minister of defense, the paper stated, "harbors a latent risk that in seeking to establish himself in the line of succession in his father's lifetime, he may overreach."

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, 55, happens to be a trusted US ally, and he rose to political and international fame due to his success as head of the Saudi counter-terrorism program, where he also became a favorite of the CIA.

The Saudi king understands the importance of having the US support for bypassing the line of succession. And, as some reports have claimed, Muhammad bin Salman is cooperating and consulting with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, on all the matters relating to the possibility of taking the post of the next King of the country.

According to the same report, the most important advice the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi has given to bin Salman is about becoming "the United States' preferred choice as the next ruler of Saudi Arabia."

As such, while bin Mohammad does have the support of all the nation's armed forces, the National Guard and the other powerful Arab states, and while the Crown Prince has only police units at his disposal, bin Salman continues to be taken largely as an "immature" and "inexperienced" prince. His multiple failures in Yemen have further shadowed his international position.

After the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, called for an independent international investigation of the crimes against human rights being committed in Yemen by Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces, Prince Muhammad is facing a complex task in his ascent to supreme power, bypassing the Crown Prince.

If the tradition of succession is to be broken for bin Muhammad, it will certainly set the precedence for other 200 princes and intensify the struggle for power which may lead to the monarchy's implosion.