

Palace coup in Saudi Arabia

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Saudi Arabia's 82-year-old King Salman has issued a series of decrees proclaiming his favourite son, the 31-year-old Mohammed bin Salman, as his immediate successor. He supplants Salman's nephew, the head of internal security and deputy prime minister, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef.

Salman also consolidated Mohammed's power base, appointing the 34-year-old Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef, who is very close to the new crown prince, to head the million-strong interior ministry, responsible for the suppression and intimidation of the Saudi people in the name of "fighting terrorism."

The new crown prince, previously second in line to the throne, already holds the defence and economy portfolios, and chairs the highest board of Aramco, the world's largest oil company. The appointment makes him king in all but name, presiding over a royal household of more than 7,000 princes riven with factional infighting.

He sought support for his accession to the throne by reversing cuts to civil service salaries implemented last September and granting an additional week's holiday, announced to mark the end of Ramadan. According to the *Economist*, this will add a further US\$13 billion to the budget deficit, projected at US\$86 billion or 12 percent of GDP this year.

He also orchestrated a series of moves to isolate bin Nayef and strengthen his own position, including appointing his younger brother, Prince Khalid, as ambassador to Washington to strengthen his relations with the Trump administration.

Relations with former President Barack Obama's White House became increasingly fraught after Washington failed to follow up on its threat to attack Syria in 2013 and reached a nuclear accord with Shi'ite-ruled Iran that Riyadh vehemently opposed.

Mohammed bin Salman also appointed a cousin and ally as deputy governor of the oil-rich Eastern

Province, whose governor is Mohammed bin Nayef's brother, Saud bin Nayef.

Salman's dethroning of a second crown prince (he pensioned off Prince Muqrin in April 2015) since his accession to the throne in January 2015 reflects the increasingly turbulent situation in which the House of Saud, the world's largest oil producer and crucial US ally, finds itself.

The palace coup is a desperate attempt to resolve the military, political and economic conflicts that stem from the decades of US-led wars in the region at the expense of the Saudi masses. It portends ever-more autocratic rule, economic hardship and an escalation of regional wars of which the ongoing hostile moves by Saudi Arabia against Qatar and Iran are the most dramatic indication.

The economic crisis gripping the country has been acerbated by the murderous, but largely unsuccessful war instigated by Mohammed bin Salman against the rebel Houthis and their ally, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, who still control the capital and most of the northern part of the country. The war has led to 4,773 confirmed civilian deaths and 8,272 injured, mass starvation and cholera, with a child dying every 10 minutes and 7 million people at acute risk of starvation in what the United Nations has called the worst humanitarian disaster since 1945.

The war has served to destabilise Riyadh's relations with its traditional allies. Pakistan has refused repeated requests to send troops to fight the Houthis, while Oman has stayed out of it and Egypt has provided only token assistance.

Riyadh has also poured tens of billions of dollars into arming reactionary Islamist militias, designated as "rebels" in the US-backed war to overthrow the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad and isolate Iran, Syria's main backer in the Middle East. The six-year-long war has killed nearly half a million people. Four

million people have fled the country while upwards of 6.3 million are internally displaced.

The Saudis have whipped up sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia throughout the region and opposed Iran's support for Riyadh's political rivals in Lebanon, Bahrain and Iraq.

Mohammed bin Salman, as minister of defence, has adopted a particularly bellicose attitude towards Iran, framing tensions with Tehran in sectarian terms, stating that Iran's goal is "to control the Islamic world" and to spread its Shiite doctrine, and vowing to take "the battle" to Iran.

Emboldened by President Donald Trump's first overseas visit to Riyadh last month, he precipitated a crisis in the Gulf Cooperation Council by trying to isolate Qatar, accusing it of supporting ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran.

His purpose was to dragoon Qatar behind the Saudis' stand against Iran and its other predatory policies, including unstinting support for Egypt's military regime. He organised an economic blockade, tantamount to a declaration of war, upsetting the defence establishment in Washington, which has a crucial American military base in Qatar, and further destabilising the region. Turkey has come to Qatar's aid as has Iran, while Pakistan, Oman and Kuwait remain neutral.

Iran has accused the US and Saudi Arabia of being behind the ISIS terror attacks in Tehran two weeks ago that killed at least 12 people and injured dozens more when gunmen and suicide bombers attacked the parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic.

Social tensions are explosive. The fall in oil prices, upon which Saudi Arabia depends for 70 percent of its revenue, has led to a drastic cutback in public expenditure, the imposition of a value-added tax and the proposed sale of 5 percent of Aramco to fund an economic diversification programme.

In the face of massive budget deficits, plummeting foreign reserves and growth of less than 1 percent, the lowest for almost four years, Mohammed overturned the Kingdom's decades-long policy of buying political quiescence with a social contract that has provided some security—via low utility prices, social subventions and public-sector jobs—for the Saudi population, and promoted a wave of Sunni-based Saudi nationalism.

It was he who, last September, slashed housing, vacation and sickness allowances and reduced some civil service salaries by a third.

Utility bills rose as subsidies fell, fuelling poverty levels while he splashed out US\$500 million on a yacht.

This month, the government tightened restrictions on foreign workers, who constitute about 12 million of the country's 33 million population, in a bid to reduce unemployment among Saudi nationals, reserving retail jobs for Saudis. One million are expected to leave in the next few weeks.

The official unemployment rate of 12.1 percent is widely believed to be an underestimate. Other estimates suggest it is 27-29 percent, rising to 33 percent among young people between 20 and 24 years of age and 38 percent for 24-to-29-year-olds, in a country where two thirds of the population are under 30. Some 1.9 million Saudis out of a total citizenry of 20 million are expected to enter the workforce in the next decade.

While Saudi Arabia's huge oil wealth is owned by a royal family that lives in the lap of luxury, at least 20 percent of Saudis suffer "crippling" or "severe" poverty, and between 2 and 4 million people live in poverty in Riyadh alone.

Saudi Arabia's Shia minority in the oil-rich Eastern province suffer from crushing poverty following decades of economic neglect and political marginalisation. Their villages and towns such as Qatif, al-Hasa and particularly al-Awamiya, the hometown of the executed Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr Baqih al Nimr, lack the infrastructure of their Sunni counterparts.

Migrant workers, mainly from the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, who number about 12 million, fare even worse, with low wages and financial hardship, exacerbated by an exploitative sponsorship system.



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