

Struggles *for* Political Change *in the* Arab World

Regimes, Oppositions,
and External Actors
after the Spring

EDITED BY

Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy,
and Hesham Sallam



Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World

WEISER CENTER FOR EMERGING DEMOCRACIES

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Contents

List of Figures	ix
List of Tables	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Preface	xv
<i>Hicham Alaoui</i>	
INTRODUCTION Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World: Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring	1
<i>Hesham Sallam, Lisa Blaydes, and Amr Hamzawy</i>	
I. Regime Strategies of Control	
1 Authoritarian Narratives and Practices in Egypt	27
<i>Amr Hamzawy</i>	
2 The People vs. the Palace: Power and Politics in Morocco since 2011	50
<i>Samia Errazzouki</i>	
3 Kuwait's Changing Landscape: Palace Projects and the Decline of Rule by Consensus	70
<i>Farah Al-Nakib</i>	
4 The Decay of Family Rule in Saudi Arabia	102
<i>Michael Herb</i>	
5 Syria's Repressive Peace	124
<i>Samer Abboud</i>	

II. Opposition Mobilization Strategies and Obstacles to Reform

- 6 | Mobilization without Movement:
Opposition and Youth Activism in Jordan 148
Sean Yom
- 7 | Cycles of Contention in Lebanon 175
Lina Khatib
- 8 | Algeria: Anatomy of a Revolutionary Situation 197
Thomas Serres
- 9 | The Nexus of Patronage, Petrol, and Population in Iraq 227
David Siddhartha Patel
- 10 | Understanding the Roots, Dynamics, and Potential
of an “Impossible” Revolution: The Prospects and
Challenges of Democratization in Sudan 249
Khalid Mustafa Medani
- 11 | Tunisia: The Challenges of Party Consolidation
and the Specter of Authoritarian Reversal 272
Lindsay J. Benstead
- 12 | Examining Yemen’s Post-2011 Trajectory:
From Reform to War to Many Yemens 299
April Longley Alley

III. Transnational Influences

- 13 | U.S. Influence on Arab Regimes:
From Reluctant Democracy Supporter to
Authoritarian Enabler 326
Sarah Yerkes
- 14 | Chinese Soft Power Projection in the Arab World:
From the Belt and Road Initiative to Global
Pandemic Response 351
Lisa Blaydes
- 15 | Iran’s Culture Wars in the Arab World 373
Abbas Milani

16 The Arab Counter-Revolution: The Formation of a Regional Alliance to Undermine the Arab Spring <i>Toby Matthiesen</i>	392
17 Myths of Expansion: Turkey's Changing Policy in the Arab World <i>Ayça Alemdaroğlu and Gönül Tol</i>	408
18 CONCLUSION: The Ongoing Struggle for Political Reform in the Arab World <i>Larry Diamond</i>	430
<i>Contributors</i>	449
<i>Index</i>	451

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Figures

9.1	Crude Oil Prices, 2000–21	234
9.2	Iraq’s Population by Age	237
11.1	Percentage of Tunisians Who Do Not Trust Political Institutions	290
18.1	Democracy Trends in the Middle East and North Africa; Freedom House, V-Dem, and EIU Democracy Index, 2006–19	432
18.2	Trends in Political Rights, Civil Liberties, and Transparency and Rule of Law in MENA (Freedom House Standardized Scores), 2005–20	433
18.3	Percentage of Respondents in Arab Countries Who Believe Democracy is the “Best System,” “Bad for the Economy,” and “Bad for Stability and Order” (2007–19), Arab Barometer Data	441

Tables

4.1	The Line of Succession among the Al Saud	121
11.1	Presidents and Prime Ministers of Tunisia (2011–Present)	278
11.2	Tunisian Elections Since 2011	294
13.1	U.S. Democracy and Governance Funding by Country (2009–21)	329
13.2	U.S. Aid, Middle East	330
18.1	Regimes of the Middle East on the Freedom House Hundred-Point Scale (2010 vs. 2020)	434
18.2	Attitudes toward Democracy (in percent), Wave 5 of Arab Barometer, 2018–19	440
18.3	Preferred Pace of Political Reform (By Age), Morocco and All Arab Countries (Average), 2018–19	442
18.4	Trends in Governance in the Middle East and North Africa, Average Percentile Rank for States of Middle East and North Africa	444

4 | The Decay of Family Rule in Saudi Arabia

Michael Herb

For decades, a cautious, and increasingly geriatric, ruling family governed Saudi Arabia. Propelled by its massive oil wealth the Kingdom modernized rapidly, yet social and political institutions changed slowly in a political landscape dominated by an aging ruling family. Sclerosis, rather than dynamism, characterized the regime. Mohammed bin Salman (often referred to as MBS), the Kingdom's crown prince and strongman, has upended all of this. The Kingdom is no longer ruled by the old, for he is in his thirties. Features of Saudi life that seemed immutable, or at least thoroughly entrenched, dissolved: most notably, women at long last secured the right to drive. MBS relaxed repressive religious controls on public life, winning plaudits, especially from younger Saudis.

In other arenas, the new dynamism has been unsettling rather than refreshing. The war in Yemen predictably became a costly humanitarian disaster while achieving none of the initial Saudi objectives of the intervention. The blockade of Qatar, intended to bring Qatar to heel, accomplished little. The Saudi regime, once the beneficiary of broad ties to the United States establishment, threw its lot in with the Trump administration, a choice that undermined a relationship that has been a foundation of Saudi foreign policy for several generations. The Arab Spring did not cause the personalization of the Saudi regime, but the personalization of the regime shaped the Saudi reaction to the Arab Spring. As Toby Matthiesen observes in his chapter in this volume, the Saudi crown prince became the face of the Arab counter-revolution, and internal changes in Saudi Arabia made the Saudi counter-revolution more bellicose than it likely would have been otherwise. The Kingdom's newly aggressive foreign policy came at a time of particular tur-

moil in the region, and had widespread impact in Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain, and elsewhere.

In this chapter I seek to explain the rise of Mohammed bin Salman. My analysis seeks an explanation for the decay of the family regime that has ruled Saudi Arabia for so long, and whose passing—if that is what is happening—is a troubling portent for the future stability of the kingdom. These changes in Saudi Arabia are part of a wider, and troubling, trend toward personalism and autocratic repression in a number of states in the region, as can be seen in several other chapters in this volume, most notably Amr Hamzawy's chapter on Egypt under Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi.

The Rise of Mohammed bin Salman

In November 2017, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman imprisoned hundreds of prominent citizens, among them senior members of the Al Saud ruling family, in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. Credible accusations were made of abuse, and a number of those detained were hospitalized. One detainee—not a member of the royal family—died. This came on the heels of the dismissal of two successive princes in the established line of succession and the elevation of the king's son Mohammed to the position of crown prince. This struck many observers as a major change in the nature of the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia. In this chapter, I consider several explanations for the ability of Mohammed bin Salman to apparently take personal control of what had been a regime characterized by multiple centers of power.

In making my argument I draw on several useful findings in the literature on authoritarian regimes, and in particular the literature on the emergence of personalist rule in regimes with a strong ruling group that, at least initially, constrains the ruler. In Saudi Arabia, the decay of family rule, I argue, occurred as a result of several factors, the most important of which is that over the past several reigns power has become increasingly concentrated in the king's court, rather than in the ministries. But the authority of those in the king's court ends when he dies. This gave MBS, whose power was entirely derivative of that of his father, a strong incentive to use his father's authority quickly and aggressively to disrupt the family regime.

In this chapter, I employ a type of process tracing. I set out several distinct explanations for the decay of family rule in Saudi Arabia (Ben-

nett and Checkel 2014). I then examine the evidence for and against each of these explanations. While I am primarily interested in one case in this chapter, the case has lessons for our understanding the ruling regimes in other Gulf monarchies and how they might change in the future. And the Saudi case provides some larger lessons for the literature on the emergence of personalist rule in authoritarian regimes.

The Emergence of Personalist Dictatorships in the Literature

The existing literature on authoritarian regimes provides several insights that help us understand changes in the nature of the Saudi monarchy in recent years. That said, the literature's findings about monarchism are less firm than the findings about other regime types, for the straightforward reason that there are not so many monarchs who rule in the modern world. There are many more military regimes and party-led regimes, and this makes it easier to draw conclusions about these regime types.

There is some agreement among scholars of authoritarian regimes that authoritarian regimes with political institutions tend to be more durable than those that lack political institutions. Magaloni suggest that wise rulers will establish “credible limits to dictatorial abuses” (Magaloni 2008, 720, 716) and asks why all rulers do not create parties (2008, 725). Indeed Magaloni argues that wise rulers might create institutions precisely in order to make their rule more stable: “A dictator will possess an interest to uphold a system of credible power-sharing with his ruling clique in order to make his life less vulnerable to conspiracies, military coups, and violent rebellions” (2008, 716).

Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz (GWF from here on out) find that dictators who invent new parties after coming to power survive longer in power than dictators who do not create new parties (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 117). That said, they also find that the impact of personalism on regime longevity depends on regime type: personalism makes party-based regimes less durable and military-led regimes more durable.¹

Dynastic monarchies, of the sort found in Saudi Arabia, probably

1. Specifically, this is authoritarian regimes in which the ruling group was a party that existed before the regime came to power (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 230, 90).

resemble party-based regimes, in terms of the nature of the institutionalization of the ruling group, more than military-led regimes. Their remarkable record of durability certainly suggests that this is the case. Scholars of authoritarianism generally think that ruling family institutions in monarchies increase the level of institutionalization in the authoritarian regime, and might plausibly confer benefits parallel to those provided by political parties. Milan Svobik explicitly cites the Gulf monarchies as institutions that “facilitate authoritarian power-sharing” (Svobik 2012, 91). GWF similarly note that some seizure groups are composed of ruling families, and these families limit “the discretion of the monarch” and can remove him from power in extreme circumstances (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 9).

Why then might a ruler in an authoritarian regime choose to personalize, rather than institutionalize, his rule? It appears that there is likely a tension between the interests of individual members of the regime and the long-term survival of the regime. An individual member of the ruling group, if he can personalize his power, can better fend off threats from the remainder of the ruling group. This personalization occurs at the expense of the survival of the regime, since the death of a personalist dictator is more likely to result in the end of the regime than the death of a ruler of an institutionalized regime (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 230). But for the dictator himself, the strategy might make sense, especially if the dictator feels insecure within the ruling group.

Svobik and GWF agree on the basic goal of a ruler who opts to personalize power: it is to remove the capacity of the broader ruling group to threaten to remove him. Milan Svobik identifies a single remedy that the ruling coalition has against an overweening dictator: “The ruling coalition may attempt to deter the dictator’s opportunism by threatening to stage a coup” (Svobik 2009, 478). GWF make a similar argument about the relationship between dictators and the group on which they relied to come to power: “. . . only credible threats to oust the dictator deter him from renegeing on agreements and abusing his supporters” (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 68).

This gives us a benchmark by which to—roughly—measure the degree of success that a ruler has achieved in personalizing his rule. Most of the Gulf monarchies have, in their modern histories, an instance in which a family coalition removed a ruler and replaced him with someone else. In 1995, the son of the ruler of Qatar overthrew his father; in 2006, the crown prince of Kuwait removed his cousin. In

Saudi Arabia, we need to go back to the deposition of Saud in 1964 by a family coalition headed by his brother Faisal for an example. So, coups are certainly a possibility—they do not need to be frequent for rulers to worry about the possibility of a family-led coup.

Much of what MBS has done over the past several years speaks directly to his fear that the family could remove him, and his determination to prevent that outcome. That is why he imprisoned his relatives in the Ritz-Carlton, and it is why he has been ruthless in suppressing any sign of dissent amongst his relatives, even at the cost of violating long-standing family traditions.

Explaining the Rise of MBS and the Decline of the Al Saud

I consider here five explanations for the decay of dynastic monarchism in Saudi Arabia over the past several years:

- 1 **Modernization.** The ruling families, as governing institutions, were built on norms that prevailed in Gulf Arabian societies on the eve of the era of oil. Modernization has built a Saudi middle class less invested in these norms, a middle class that MBS could appeal to against his family.
- 2 **The Trump administration.** Mohammed bin Salman found a close ally in the Trump administration despite, or perhaps because of, his authoritarian tendencies. Another administration—virtually any other U.S. administration, from either party—would have been less enthusiastic about his assault on his family out of concern for its longer-term effects on the Kingdom's stability.
- 3 **Fiefdoms.** The family institution could not endure once the initial ruling group passed from the scene because subsequent members of the ruling group lacked the fiefdoms within the bureaucratic state that the earlier generation of princes had built. This sapped their power to balance the king's court, controlled by MBS.
- 4 **Family institutions.** While the ruling family has in the past constrained Saudi kings, the formal political institutions give all power to the king. The Al Saud failed to translate its political power into political institutions, and thus left an opening for a determined personalist ruler to transform the system.

Informal institutions—the rules surrounding the succession in particular—also eroded and could not survive a determined attack from the ruler’s court.

- 5 **Sons in the royal court.** Sons of the current king, if allowed to wield his authority from the royal court, have a very strong incentive to use that authority to disrupt the family regime.

Modernization

Oil-led modernization has created a middle class in Saudi Arabia that is less attuned to the pre-oil norms of Arabian society. The experience of decades of family rule has created, among many middle-class Saudis, a desire for change. While MBS is a product of the Saudi monarchy, he also promised change, and this allowed him to win support from citizens as he moved against his family. The *Guardian* found evidence of this in an article published when the Ritz-Carlton was first turned into a jail, when it was still presumed that the norms of civility in the ruling family would prevail. Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, an Emirati scholar is quoted saying that:

There is a cultural readiness in Saudi Arabia to treat everyone equally . . . If these princes are found guilty then their place will be in jail and rightly so. The Saudis will be more than happy to see them imprisoned.

There are over three hundred million Arabs, I don’t think we’re so tribal anymore. There is a large middle class in Saudi Arabia who is behaving like middle class people anywhere else in the world. They are the ones looking into this more than anyone; they’re yearning for the 21st-century Saudi Arabia. (*Guardian*, November 6, 2017)

It is true that many in Saudi Arabia supported the crackdown on the family. But it is also true that this sentiment is not new (and, to be fair, Abdulla is not saying it is particularly new). Levels of education and exposure to the modern world have been rising in Saudi Arabia for decades. One can identify any number of historical tipping points that might have provided an opening for an ambitious prince to mobilize public support against his family: the initial spread of education in the early days of oil, the later wave of Saudis who studied abroad, the

advent of satellite television, the rise of social media, the Arab Spring, and so forth. The family regime in Saudi Arabia survived them all. Perhaps these changes reached a breaking point of some sort in 2017. More plausibly, it was changes in the ruling family that drove the timing of the breakdown in family rule.

That said, Abdulla's observation does help us understand Mohammed bin Salman's strategy. Like other royals he recognized that it is possible to reach around the ruling group to ordinary citizens, arguing that he will defend citizens against a corrupt elite. MBS took advantage of the ossification and stagnation of the kingdom's geriatric ruling class and leveraged his popularity against the family.

The Trump Administration

King Salman appointed his son Mohammed crown prince in June 2017, not long after the start of the Trump administration. The crackdown on the royal family came a few months later and was met with little resistance in Washington. The timing suggests that the decay of family rule in Saudi Arabia might have been made possible—or at least accelerated—by the results of the 2016 election in the United States.

Some of the facts fit this view. It is clear that Trump felt a strong affinity for personalist dictators, and this is not something he shared with any recent American presidents. Previous American administrations were very concerned with the stability of Saudi Arabia and generally saw the ruling family as a crucial source of stability in the Kingdom. It was widely recognized that the consequences of the failure of the Saudi monarchy could be dire. The failure of the Shah's monarchy in Iran bedevils U.S. policy in the region decades later, and the failure of Saudi Arabia could be, if anything, even worse. These longer-term considerations, which otherwise might have led the United States to push back against MBS and his ambitions, had little weight at the top levels of the Trump administration.

That said, the decay of family norms cannot be laid entirely at the feet of the new administration in Washington. The timing is wrong, because the decay of family norms surrounding the succession started well before Trump became president. Gregory Gause, in an early article on the Ritz-Carlton purge, argues that “although some saw the Ritz-Carlton roundup as a consolidation of power, MBS had already secured his position by then” (Gause 2019, 82). On becoming king—in January

of 2015—King Salman had appointed the current second-in-line, his younger brother Muqrin, as crown prince. He appointed a nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, as second-in-line. All of this was well within the norms of the ruling family (Mohammed bin Nayef was a grandson of Ibn Saud, the founder of the current iteration of the Saudi state, but the appointment of a grandson was inevitable). The break from family norms, and the clearest indication of decay in the family institution, came in April 2015 when King Salman abruptly removed Muqrin, promoted Mohammed bin Nayef to crown prince, and appointed his son Mohammed as second-in-line.

This violated several family norms. No king had removed a relative from the line of succession since King Saud was deposed in the 1960s. And no king had placed a son in the line of succession. Salman had already named his son Mohammed minister of defense back in January when he became king (Salman had himself appointed to this position after the death of his brother Sultan in 2011).

This occurred during the Obama administration, and it does not appear that the Obama administration objected to the April 2015 change to the line of succession. In part we might reasonably attribute this to the fact that Mohammed bin Nayef had a strongly pro-American reputation: one prominent American former official wrote in 2015 that “MBN [Mohammed bin Nayef] is the darling of America’s counterterrorism and intelligence services . . . [H]e is pro-American, almost certainly more so than any other member of the Saudi leadership” (Riedel 2015).

The addition of MBS to the line of succession coincided with a particularly difficult period in relations between the Obama administration and the Saudi leadership, caused by the administration’s negotiation of what became the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. In mid-May, the king was widely seen to have snubbed Obama by pointedly refusing to accept an invitation to attend a retreat at Camp David (Henderson 2015). The long-run implications of the change in the succession did not bode well for the stability of the Kingdom. In the short run, however, Mohammed bin Nayef became the crown prince, and that was easy to see as a win for U.S. interests at a time when American influence in Riyadh appeared to be on the wane.

In some respects, the timing of Mohammed bin Salman’s appointment as crown prince (which occurred in 2017) suggests a direct influence of the Trump administration. MBS quickly and effectively won favor in the Trump administration when it came into office in early

2017. Trump visited Saudi Arabia in May of 2017, one stop in his first trip abroad as president. A few weeks later, the king dismissed Mohammed bin Nayef (his nephew) as crown prince and appointed his son Mohammed in his place. There is abundant evidence that the Saudi regime felt empowered, or unleashed, by the change of administration in Washington. The best evidence of this is that Saudi Arabia initiated its blockade of Qatar shortly after Trump's May 2017 visit, and actually put the pretext in place (via a hack of the Qatari government's website) before Trump left the region. Mohammed bin Nayef's deep ties to the U.S. foreign security establishment did not, of course, much concern the Trump administration.

The question then is the degree to which Trump administration support was crucial in the rise of MBS, or if it simply made a process that would have occurred anyway easier. In other words, in a counterfactual world in which Jeb Bush or Hillary Clinton were president, would Salman have felt empowered to make his son crown prince? And would MBS still have imprisoned so many of his relatives in the Ritz-Carlton? There is evidence on both sides. There is no doubt that the ruling family institution was already suffering from decay even during the Obama administration, most visibly in the appointment of MBS to the line of succession in 2015. Nonetheless, there is also much to suggest that subsequent moves, and especially the timing of the removal of Mohammed bin Nayef from the line of succession, occurred only when MBS had established a relationship with Trump and those close to him. Mohammed bin Nayef was removed a month after Trump's visit to the Kingdom. But one may also wonder if Trump simply made a step that was likely to occur anyway, easier. The appointment of the crown prince is a core question of the allocation of power in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime has shown a willingness to cross the U.S. administration on matters that it sees as crucial to its core interests. There is no reason to think that any US administration could have imposed an outright veto on the removal of Mohammed bin Nayef. Instead, overt American resistance to the move would imperil the relationship with an important ally. But MBS has shown his willingness to threaten that relationship for stakes much, much smaller than the succession. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi comes to mind.

The Saudis brought the blockade of Qatar to an end a few days before the start of the Biden administration, on January 5, 2021. The timing, again, suggests that the American attitude can have an impact in Riyadh. The Biden administration has made its displeasure with

MBS clear, most notably in its insistence that the administration would communicate with King Salman rather than with his son Mohammad. There is no sign, as of the summer of 2021, that this has emboldened MBS's enemies in the ruling family or has empowered them to contest the succession. That said, politics in the family can be opaque, and it remains at least possible that MBS's route to full power has become more difficult with the change of administration in Washington, though there can be little doubt that he aspires to be king and will not easily be dissuaded from his goal.

Fiefdoms and Faisal's Generation

Turning to explanations centered on the regime itself, it is sometimes argued that the family regime in Saudi Arabia could not survive the death of the princes who formed the coalition that took power when Faisal deposed his brother Saud in 1964. These princes included all of the subsequent kings, up to and including the current king.

These brothers were mostly appointed to the highest posts in the regime by King Faisal, and largely kept them until their deaths or promotion. Thus, Sultan was the minister of defense from 1963 to his death in 2011, a remarkable span of 48 years. Fahd was minister of interior from 1962 until he became crown prince in 1975. Nayef served as Fahd's deputy in the interior ministry and took it over on Fahd's departure, serving as minister for another 37 years until his death in 2012. Abdullah was appointed head of the National Guard in 1963 (or perhaps 1962) and left the post 47 years later in 2010, a few years after he became king. Salman was appointed emir of Riyadh in 1963 and stepped down in 2011 when he was appointed minister of defense.

These men controlled what Steffen Hertog calls fiefdoms within the Saudi state (Hertog 2010). They were in charge when virtually everyone in these institutions were hired and promoted, and they were in many senses responsible for the construction of these institutions. Often, they placed their sons in senior positions in the ministries. None of these princes were removed from their posts for any reason other than death or promotion.

The literature on authoritarianism suggests that the crucial check on the emergence of personalist rule is the ability of the ruling group to depose the ruler. Many members of this group in fact participated in the removal of King Saud in the early 1960s. That was the last time there

was a real threat of a coup against a king emanating from the ruling group (or, really, anyplace else in the Saudi state). But the durability of these men in their posts, their deep ties to the security forces, and their seniority in the family, all likely kept open the possibility that they could remove a king who acted against their wishes. And despite myriad policy and personal differences, no king ever removed any of these men from leadership of their fiefdoms.

Thus, one plausible explanation for what changed in recent years in Saudi Arabia is simply that the members of the ruling group who could constrain the king all died, leaving Salman. He was the last man standing and felt free to appoint his own son to the position of crown prince, something his older brothers had never felt free to do. Personalist rule emerged because the ruling group could not reproduce itself.

Ali Shihabi (2017), a Saudi sympathetic to MBS, argues that

Saudi watchers have consistently misread a royal family member's command of key military apparatuses, specifically, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and the national guard, as something that gives that family member independent control over his respective organization. This is a flawed interpretation.

Instead, he writes, power flows from the king, and for any minister “whatever authority they enjoyed had been delegated to them by the king, and once this was withdrawn, that authority ended.” Some members of the Al Saud family have been politically marginalized, but “alienation does not mean that these princes possess the power to threaten the throne or to determine the succession.” But he then immediately adds an important qualification: “This has been particularly true since the passing of the founding generation of princes who originally united the country with the founder, King Abdul Aziz.” So, when the fiefdoms of the original generation put in power by Faisal were at their peak, the king was more constrained than today.

There is, however, some counter-evidence to this view that the deaths of the men who formed Faisal's coalition doomed the ruling family as an institution. These men did in fact attempt to preserve their influence and reproduce it in the next generation. The generation of King Faisal largely passed these fiefdoms to their sons. When Nayef died in 2012 after serving as 37 years as minister of the interior, his son Mohammed bin Nayef took over his role (after an interregnum of a few

months during which Nayef's younger brother Ahmed held the post). Mohammed bin Nayef continued in the post even after being appointed crown prince and was head of the ministry of interior when he was abruptly dismissed from all of his positions in 2017. Abdullah, who became king in 2005, turned over the National Guard to his son Mutaib in 2010. Mutaib continued to command the National Guard until the day he was imprisoned in the Ritz-Carlton.

These princes of the second generation served for decades under their fathers: they inherited their fiefs. And yet MBS could strip them of their power in 2017 despite their seeming control of two of the most important institutions of coercion in the kingdom.

Institutions

The crucial political rule of the dynastic monarchies of the Gulf is the principle that a ruler comes to power when he receives the *bay'a*, or allegiance, of his family. This is a largely informal requirement and one that, in some cases, is open to the exercise of coercion. In the early years of oil, Gulf rulers found it necessary, however, to build family coalitions to come to power, and distributed posts in the state in order to secure the support or acquiescence of their relatives (Herb 1999). This then led to the creation of ministerial fiefdoms and a constrained ruler.

What did not happen in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf dynastic monarchies was the further formal institutionalization of the principle of family approval of new monarchs. Saudi Arabia lacks a constitution, and has instead a Basic Law which was issued as a royal decree. It can be changed by royal decree at any time. Under the Basic Law, appointments to high offices—including posts such as the minister of defense and the head of the National Guard—are made by the king at his discretion. This gives an extraordinary amount of power to anyone who can influence the decrees issued by the king from the royal court. And MBS now appears to have the ability to determine most or all of what will be in his father's royal decrees. Geddes, Wright and Frantz note that "If dictators can choose the members of the regime's top decision-making inner circle, they can change its composition without taking into account party procedures, the military chain of command, or, in monarchies, the opinions of ruling-family members" (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 11). That is pretty much what happened in Saudi Arabia.

The Al Saud were not insensible to the need for a more formal institutionalization of family rule. In 2006, King Abdullah set up an Allegiance Council whose membership consists of one prince from the line of each of the sons of the founder of the kingdom. Abdullah, however, specified that the Allegiance Council would be binding only on his successor, then expected to be his brother Sultan. This did not bode well for the ability of the Allegiance Council to bind the ruler—especially given that Abdullah put the Allegiance Council in place via decree and the next king would be able to remove or alter it by decree. During his reign, Abdullah did occasionally consult the Allegiance Council, but inconsistently, and not in manner that really devolved authority from the king to the council. He did not consult the council when appointing Nayef as second-in-line to the throne.

The potential ability of the king to undermine the family institution was exacerbated by the aging of the sons of Ibn Saud. In the nearly half-century between the start of Faisal's reign in 1964 and the death of Sultan in 2011, no prince appointed to the line of succession (even as second-in-line) failed to become king. In King Abdullah's ten-year reign, however, two princes in the line of succession died before becoming king (Sultan in 2011 and Nayef the next year). Abdullah thus appointed more princes to the line of succession than any previous king in modern Saudi Arabia. Moreover, his appointments also skipped more sons of Ibn Saud than previous appointments. Rather than skipping one or two sons, he skipped six princes when appointing Nayef second-in-line, and another five when appointing Muqrin second-in-line.² This last appointment went all the way to the last living son of Ibn Saud. Abdullah's goal, it appears, was to push the family, sooner rather than later, toward a transition to the next generation. The overall effect of this level of change in the succession, however, was to weaken the informal institution of the succession, which centered on the passing of power from one son to another. With that rule weakened, Salman had an easier task of pushing through the series of changes to the line of succession that resulted in the appointment of his own son as crown prince in 2017.

Finally, institutions, perhaps more than has been appreciated, rely on the willingness of political actors to respect them. This is especially true of informal practices and norms. These norms were strong in Saudi Arabia, and they mattered. But MBS shows no signs of any respect

2. His appointment of Salman as crown prince in 2012 skipped no princes.

for family traditions or norms and this, combined with his position of power in his father's court, makes him a lethal threat to the family institution.

The Royal Court

Mohammed bin Salman is not actually the ruler of Saudi Arabia. He is the son of the ruler. And in this we find a potential explanation for the weakening of the control of the ruling group over the king. The logic of family rule is that authority is dispersed among the ruling group, and members of this group occupy important positions in the state and control of key ministries. The death of a ruler brings a new ruler to power, but key members of the existing ruling group retain their positions of power in the state.

The Saudi regime, however, is formally constructed as an absolutist monarchy in which power is vested in one person, the king. The Kingdom's Basic Law makes this abundantly clear: no institution, the ruling family or otherwise, constrains the power of the king. Over the past decades, there have been indications that those who are closest to the king—that is, those in his court, rather than those in his cabinet—have amassed more authority than in the past. Those in the court have much to lose when the current king dies and is replaced by the prince next in line. The increasing age of Saudi kings makes the dynamic stronger: elderly kings tend to delegate more of their authority, and they have adult sons who stand to lose more when a new king comes to power.

Thus, the passing of power among members of the ruling group in recent years has not been one in which power clearly passes from the current king to a member of the family who is arguably the second most influential member of the family. Instead, the entire court is bypassed, and one group is replaced by another. This raises the stakes of the succession.

How Has This Played Out in Recent Reigns in Saudi Arabia?

King Khalid: Khalid was not a particularly active ruler during his reign, which lasted from 1975 to 1982. He delegated much of his authority to his brother Fahd, who was also his crown prince (Al-Rasheed 2010, 143). When Khalid died, Fahd was effectively already in charge.

King Fahd: Fahd himself grew ill in office and toward the end of his reign, he turned over many responsibilities to his young son Abdulaziz, though his son was not able to use this position to establish his authority over the fiefdoms of his various uncles (Al-Rasheed 2005, 201; 2010, 212). Nor was he named the head of an important ministry that would give him a power base separate from the ruler's court. And he was not appointed to a place in the line of succession to the throne: doing that would have required removing the head of the National Guard or the minister of defense. When Fahd died and Abdullah became king in 2005, Abdullah did not remove Fahd's son Abdulaziz from his post as head of the prime minister's court (the prime minister in Saudi Arabia is the king) until 2011, several years into his reign. In July 2019, Abdulaziz tweeted in support of the deposed Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef and there were reports he was arrested in September of that year. The last tweet from his previously very active Twitter account was September 11, 2017. He has been seen very little since, though in 2019, a relative tweeted a photo of him at his palace, with MBS, suggesting a rapprochement with the new regime, or at least that MBS felt it useful to show to the world that Abdulaziz was alive, healthy looking, and at home.³

King Abdullah: When Abdullah dismissed Abdulaziz bin Fahd from his post as head of the prime minister's court, he also consolidated the prime minister's court with the royal court and put the combined entity under Khalid al-Tuwaijri, who is not a member of the ruling family.⁴ Abdullah delegated a good deal of influence to al-Tuwaijri, an influence that was entirely reliant on Abdullah's own authority: when Salman came to power he immediately dismissed al-Tuwaijri, and he was one of the political figures imprisoned in the Ritz-Carlton by MBS in 2017. Abdullah did not appear to delegate control over his court to his sons; instead, he installed Mutaib as head of the National Guard and made Turki the emir of Riyadh—both were jailed in the Ritz-Carlton.

King Salman: When Salman became king there was some question as to his mental fitness, though he is not incapacitated, and numerous reports describe him as at least lucid. But he is quite old, and he has delegated the actual administration of the government. Like Fahd, he

3. Details on Abdulaziz's fate are scarce. The *Middle East Eye*, which has reported on Abdulaziz, appears to be funded by sources close to Qatar (*Middle East Eye* 2017a; 2017b; *Arab News* 2019).

4. Diwan 2019; see also Okaz 2011.

appointed a son—MBS—to run his court. But he also named his son Mohammad to the position of minister of defense and made him the head of a number of government bodies with wide authority in the economy and security services. MBS then used this delegated authority rapidly and aggressively to cement his authority over the state apparatus. Having secured the state, he then turned against members of his family. This culminated in his appointment as crown prince.

MBS had good reason to move quickly. His authority depends entirely upon that of his father. His father, in turn, is elderly and his death could put MBS in a situation akin to that of Abdulaziz bin Fahd or Khalid al-Tuwaijri. The only way to avoid this was to insert himself directly into the line of succession and suppress opposition from the rest of his family. And that is what he did, within three years of his father becoming king. He seems to have calculated that he needed to move fast and decisively, or be swept aside entirely when his father died.

The Stability of Saudi Arabia

The argument proposed in this chapter suggests that the Achilles heel of the Saudi family regime can be found in the concentration of power in royal court combined with the weakness of other formal and informal institutions. The king's power to rule by decree is essentially unbounded. If the king wields this power himself, or delegates it to another prince in the line of succession, the system is stable. But King Abdullah delegated much of his authority to a commoner who was swept out of power when Abdullah died. When Salman replaced him, he delegated power to his son Mohammad. His son recognized that he risked being swept aside himself when his father died, unless he forcibly inserted himself into the line of succession. So he did just that, using his father's essentially unchecked power over the state to repress any dissent from any quarter. The aging of the ruling family provided a crucial assist: the generation of princes that came to power with King Faisal had died off, and frequent changes to the succession when Abdullah was king—caused by the aging of the sons of Ibn Saud—made it easier to imagine further changes to the succession under Salman. And MBS's willingness to take risks mattered too: there was no guarantee that this would not end very badly for him, and he plunged ahead nonetheless. He gambled, and it appears that his gamble paid off, for him at least.

Can the Family Institution Rebound?

Family institutions in the Gulf—dynastic monarchies—have been quite durable over the past decades. The rise of MBS might mark the eclipse of dynastic monarchism in Saudi Arabia, and his personalism could serve as a model for other rulers in the region. Yet it is too early to entirely write off the family institution. The monarchies of the Arab Gulf show an oscillation of sorts between periods in which a single ruler gains a good deal of authority, and periods in which the ruler is more constrained by this family. Clearly Saudi Arabia is in a period in which one member of the family is ascendant, threatening to fundamentally change the nature of the regime. Yet there remains some possibility that his reign will end with a reversion to family rule. A parallel example might be the reestablishment of the authority of the Politburos in the Soviet Union and China after periods of highly personalist rule in those countries.

What this requires is that the underlying institution of the dynastic monarchy survives the rule of Mohammed bin Salman. The key measure of this is the degree to which MBS continues to appoint his relatives to positions of authority in the regime. Thus far, at least, he has largely continued to do this. Provincial governors (emirs) are still members of the family, as are key ministers. The dynastic monarchy no longer constrains the king, but it has not been dispersed. If MBS wanted to destroy it, however, he probably could. The definitive end to dynastic monarchism would be a provision in the Basic Law, such as those found in Europe and some other (former) Middle Eastern monarchies, that prohibits members of the ruling family from occupying cabinet positions. The Constitution of Libya had such a provision after the last monarch, King Idris, tangled with his family (Herb 1999, 193–97). MBS's assault, thus far, has been on members of his family who can challenge him, not on members of his family for being members of the family.

There is even some outside chance that MBS could fail to become king. His father's death will mark the last best chance for sidelined members of the family to prevent his complete control of the Kingdom. Of course, MBS knows this as well, and his efforts to root out any sign of opposition among his relatives can be explained in no small part by his determination to eliminate opposition to his rise to the kingship. It certainly appears now that his efforts have been successful. There are few certainties in politics, however, especially when predicting political successions in opaque authoritarianisms.

Consequences

Over the past decades, the dynastic monarchies of the Gulf, of which Saudi Arabia is the leading example, have displayed a remarkable resilience (Herb 1999). In a region beset by upheaval, the monarchies have endured. Their resilience and stability make for a striking contrast with the turmoil of former monarchies such as Libya, Egypt, and Iraq. This resilience is not something to be valued in and of itself: the resilience of monarchism in the Gulf makes the emergence of alternate regime types difficult, especially parliamentary democracy. Yet the alternative to monarchism in the region has not usually been democracy, but instead other sorts of authoritarianism, and often without the benefits of stability that have accompanied dynastic monarchism in the region. The personalization of monarchical rule in Saudi Arabia threatens this stability—and without providing much prospect of greater freedom. This institutional decay has echoes in other regimes in the region, most notably Egypt, as Amr Hamzawy shows in this volume. One sees some initial signs of this in Kuwait as well, as Farah Al-Nakib shows in her excellent discussion in this volume of the rise of an activist Diwan al-Amiri insulated from parliamentary oversight—though Kuwait, to be sure, enjoys much stronger institutions constraining the rulers than Saudi Arabia.

One effect of the erosion of the family institution in Saudi Arabia is already apparent: MBS does not respond to concerns about his family questioning his decisions regarding making his policies more moderate. Instead, he represses dissent in his family, and accompanies this with adventurist policies while appealing to, and encouraging, nationalist sentiment in the wider population. In the past, the presence of powerful members of the ruling family who have, at least potentially, the capacity to remove the ruler has provided a check on monarchical adventurism. The threat of accountability to the family has encouraged rulers to adopt policies that favor the status quo. The war in Yemen and the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi show the downsides of an unrestrained monarch.

Dynastic monarchies have a representational aspect as well: when there are multiple foci of power, more citizens can feel that they have access to decision-makers. In the Saudi Arabia of MBS, power is concentrated, and largely inaccessible.

The decline of the institution of the ruling family is unlikely to be accompanied by the rise of other institutions in an increasingly per-

sonalist Saudi Arabia. Dynastic monarchies can beget other institutions that provide stability and even representation to citizens: the Kuwaiti Parliament, for example, has emerged in the context of the dynastic monarchy of the Al Sabah ruling family. The Parliament in the long run might threaten the rule of the family, but at least it is a competing institution, rather than just a person. In monarchies elsewhere, institutions such as political parties or military establishments have emerged alongside, or supplanted, monarchical institutions. The end result of this has been mixed. But generally speaking, it has been better than outright personalism. If MBS has institution-building instincts, he has yet to show them.

Personalist rulers tend to destroy rather than build institutions. And when they are gone, there is often little left but chaos. The findings of the literature on authoritarianism are quite emphatic on this point: personalism leads, in the long term, to poor political outcomes. A decrease in monarchical stability does not lead to an increase in the chances for a transition to a more democratic regime, but instead to the prospect of authoritarianism combined with instability.

Saudi Arabia is likely to experience a long reign by MBS, who was born in 1985 and is very much a young man. This is a disquieting prospect. Personalist regimes reflect their rulers—that is the point of breaking down institutions, so that the ruler can impose his personal will. MBS has thus far governed in a way that does not suggest restraint or caution. Perhaps he will develop these qualities over time. But the war in Yemen, the blockade of Qatar, and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, suggest a temperament not well suited for the personalist rule, for potentially many decades, of a country important to the world economy and located in a geopolitically important part of the world.

The challenges facing Saudi Arabia are immense. The citizen population is growing, and the country is almost entirely reliant on a single source of income: oil exports. Saudi Arabia has poor relations with several important neighbors in its region. The historical centerpiece of its foreign policy—good relations with the United States—is threatened both by the decline of American power, and by MBS's substantial bet on Trumpism, and continuing tensions with the Biden administration and Congress.

It is of course true that the regime upended by MBS had many downsides. It supported spectacularly illiberal domestic social policies. It was a gerontocracy that feared change and supported the status quo. It needed to change. The change that did arrive was a transition to

TABLE 4.1. The Line of Succession among the Al Saud

Prince and birth order	Became king	Named crown prince	Named second-in-line ^a	Princes who were skipped when younger brother (or a nephew) was named second-in-line	
Saud	2	1953	1933		
Faisal	3	1964	1953	<i>understood to be second-in-line before 1953</i>	
Khalid	5	1975	1965	1962	Muhammad 4
Fahd	9	1982	1975	1967	Nasir 6 Sa'd 7
Abdullah	12	2005	1982	1975	Bandar 10 Musaid 11
Sultan	15	<i>died in 2011 before becoming king</i>	2005 (<i>died 2011</i>)	1982	'Abdal-Muhsin 13 Mishaal 14
Nayef	23	<i>died in 2012 before becoming king</i>	2011 (<i>died 2012</i>)	2009	'Abd al-Rahman 16 Mitab 17 Talal 18 Badr 20 Turki II 21 Nawwaf 22
Salman	25	2015	2012	...	
Muqrin	35	<i>removed from line of succession in 2015</i>	2015	2013 2014 (<i>named deputy crown prince</i>)	Mamduh 28 'Abd al-Illah 29 Sattam 30 Ahmad 31 Mashur 34
Mohammed bin Nayef	n/a	<i>removed from line of succession in 2017</i>	2015	2015	n/a
Mohammed bin Salman	n/a		2017	2015	n/a

Note: Turki, the eldest son, died in 1918. Eight died while an older brother was second-in-line: Mansur (8), Mishari (19), Fawwaz (24), Majid (26), Thamir (27), Hithlul (32), 'Abd al-Majid (33), and Humud (36).

^a The post of second deputy prime minister conventionally designates the second-in-line since Fahd's appointment to the post. Khalid was appointed deputy prime minister in 1962.

personalist rule, and that is a cause for substantial concern for the future of Saudi Arabia.

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