



Saudi Arabia's king changes the guard

KEY POINTS

■ Through a large number of senior personnel changes at some key institutions, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud has reaffirmed his willingness to put his mark on Saudi Arabia.

■ While many of those replaced were reappointed to other positions, there is no doubt that individuals close to the king were elevated in the reshuffle.

■ The king is effectively centralising more powers and expanding state control, but the latest changes do not constitute a transformation.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud carried out a major reshuffle of key ministries and institutions on 14 February, including replacing nearly every senior justice official and overhauling the senior leadership of the Ministry of Education.

It was the first time in King Abdullah's three-and-a-half tenure that he has replaced such a large number of senior officials. The sweeping changes further added his authority to the state bureaucracy and elevated a number of individuals close to the king to more senior positions. On previous occasions, King Abdullah had reappointed most senior officials, while replacing only a few.

Much of the attention in the Western media has focused on the appointment of the first woman to a senior ministry position. While this appointment is groundbreaking, it obscures and is in some ways a distraction from the other wide-ranging changes undertaken by the king. Moreover, it would be a mistake to interpret the reshuffle as the onset of a nascent reform effort. Changes in the senior leadership of the justice and education ministries, as well as at the Senior Council of Ulema, Supreme Judicial Council, and the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice indicate a further

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah has carried out a major reshuffle of important ministries and institutions. *Christopher Boucek* examines the impact of these changes and whether they could lead to reform in the kingdom.

consolidation of state authority and an evolution of central control.

Ministerial changes

King Abdullah replaced four ministers, appointed three new deputy ministers at the Ministry of Education and named 81 new members to the Majlis al-Shura, the consultative assembly. Appointments to the Shura assembly are for four years and at the beginning of previous terms, the assembly had been

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expanded by a further 30 members, enlarging the council from an initial 60 members to its current 150. This, the fifth term of the contemporary Shura assembly, is the first time that its membership was not expanded.

Abdullah al-Obaid was replaced as education minister by Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Saud, a former deputy director of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), the kingdom's external intelligence

service. Before joining the GID, Abdullah al-Obaid held senior positions in the Saudi Arabian National Guard, a military force led by King Abdullah. Prince Faisal is from a branch of the royal family outside the current lines of succession and is also a son-in-law of King Abdullah, as he is married to Princess Adila, who is often mentioned in coverage of Saudi Arabia as an active reformist. It was reported in Western media in mid-February that before his appointment as minister, Faisal had led an effort to remove extremist material and influence from the education system.

Women's rights

Most attention has been given to the appointment of Nora bint Abdullah al-Fayez as the first woman appointed to the cabinet in the kingdom's history. Al-Fayez was named Deputy Minister of Education in charge of women's affairs and is the first woman to direct girls' education in Saudi Arabia. In the past this position had always been held by men.

A teacher by training, al-Fayez received her graduate education at Utah State University in the United States and since 1993, she ran the women's section of the Institute of Public Administration. Significant tests will have to be met as she seeks to oversee

a nearly entirely male staff and gender-segregated ministry offices.

Also appointed to the Education Ministry was the former director of the Centre of National Dialogue, Faisal bin Abdul Rahman al-Muammar. As deputy minister, al-Muammar will chair a new committee within the ministry to oversee plans to unify policies for boys' and girls' education. The King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue is a personal project of King Abdullah, which in the past several years has convened a series of kingdom-wide discussions on a range of national issues, including Sunni-Shia relations and gender rights. The centre also produces curriculum materials for the country's schools, which stress dialogue and debate.

Abdel Aziz al-Khoja, a former ambassador to Lebanon, replaced Iyad Madani as minister of culture and information. Before being posted to Lebanon, al-Khoja was ambassador to Turkey and Russia, and before entering diplomacy had served as an undersecretary in the Ministry of Information in the mid-1980s. Al-Khoja's tenure in Beirut coincided with King Abdullah's highly engaged - some argue interventionist - foreign policy in Lebanon. Madani had a reputation as a liberal and had been criticised by conservative clerics for relaxing the restrictions on the appearance of women on Saudi television. King Abdullah's ouster of 'pro-reform', Madani was in part a concession to conservative elements in the kingdom, especially segments of the ulema, for the removal of the hardline head of the Supreme Judicial Council, Sheikh Saleh bin Mohamed al-Luhaydan. Like his predecessor, al-Khoja is also viewed by some as a relative liberal and close to the king.

At the Ministry of Health, Dr Abdullah al-Rabea replaced Dr Hamad al-Manie as minister. Al-Rabea was previously executive director of health

affairs in the Saudi Arabian National Guard and is a well-known surgeon who has participated in numerous surgeries to separate conjoined twins throughout the Arab world. Saudi advances in such surgeries have raised the kingdom's international humanitarian profile. Shortly after being made health minister, al-Rabea was interviewed on live television from a Riyadh hospital operating theatre during a separation surgery.

King Abdullah's reshuffle also resulted in significant changes in the leadership of the country's judicial system. Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdelkarim al-Issa was named justice minister, replacing Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Ashaikh. Al-Issa was previously deputy head of the Grievances Court [a legal arbitration body], and before that taught at Imam Mohammed bin Saud University in Riyadh.

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Al-Ashaikh was appointed head of the Majlis al-Shura. The previous Shura chairman, Sheikh Saleh bin Humaid, was appointed chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council (the kingdom's most senior judicial position) replacing Sheikh Saleh bin Mohamed al-Luhaydan. In September 2008, Al-Luhaydan had garnered international attention for a controversial religious decree that seemingly permitted the execution of satellite television channel owners for broadcasting 'immoral' content. The ruling received consid-

erable negative attention around the world; al-Luhaydan was understood to have been an obstacle for many reform efforts. Although he remains a member of the Senior Council of Ulema, the top religious body in the country, it remains to be seen how his departure from the Supreme Judicial Council will ultimately turn out.

Prevention of vice

Other changes took place at the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice - the country's so-called 'religious police' (mutawwa) - where Sheikh Ibrahim al-Ghaith was replaced by Sheikh Abdelaziz al-Humayen. In recent years there has been increased public criticism of the mutawwa over alleged abuses of power and overzealous investigations.

Elsewhere, the Senior Council of Ulema was expanded to 21 members and for the first time in Saudi history it now includes representatives from all four schools of Sunni legal thought - until now, only the Hanbali mazhab (the official school in Saudi Arabia) - was represented on the Senior Council. Membership changes were also made at the Standing Committee for Scholarly Research and Fatwa, which is affiliated with the Senior Council of Ulema.

Among other changes that took place was the naming of three new advisers to the Royal Court, including Sheikh Abdelmohsen al-Obeikan. His appointment is significant as he plays a major role in the kingdom's rehabilitation programmes for militant jihadists detained by Saudi or foreign security services. He is also arguably one of the few state-sanctioned scholars with some credibility in extremist circles and was allegedly approached by Osama bin Laden in 1991 with the request to act as a spiritual guide for Saudi militants opposed to the House of Saud. Al-Obeikan rebuffed this plea.

Other appointments and changes

that exemplify King Abdullah's willingness to solidify control happened at the Ministry of Defence, including the promotion of land forces commander Lieutenant-General Hussein al-Qabil to be deputy chief of staff. King Abdullah's intervention here is noteworthy in what has historically been the fiefdom of Defence Minister and Crown Prince Sultan. The full implications of the king's changes are yet to be fully understood, especially when considered in the context of Sultan's ongoing illness, repeated surgeries and absence from the kingdom.

Returning militants

Since the 14 February reshuffle, there have been a number of other significant appointments made by King Abdullah. In mid-March, Prince Mishaal bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz was appointed governor of Najran province bordering Yemen. A younger son of the king, Prince Mishaal, was previously a minister plenipotentiary in the foreign ministry.

The appointment of Mishaal indicates King Abdullah's intention to increase the pace of planned development work in one of the poorest regions of the kingdom. Yemen is also the primary security concern for Saudi security officials. The majority of contraband including guns, explosives, drugs and illegal migrants come from Yemen. It is also home to a rejuvenated

Al-Qaeda organisation since the merger in January 2009 of the Saudi and Yemeni affiliates. A significant number of wanted Saudi terrorists have fled to Yemen in the past year, and approximately 10 Saudi Guantánamo Bay detention camp returnees are understood to currently be in Yemen.

Most recently – and perhaps most significantly – the long serving Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz

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was named second deputy prime minister on 27 March. The position has traditionally served as sort of 'crown prince in waiting' and was left unfilled by King Abdullah since 2005. Whether or not Nayef would succeed Prince Sultan as heir apparent is unknown, especially as the next crown prince is to be chosen through the bayat council, the as yet untested royal family organisation designed to streamline succession matters in Saudi Arabia.

Political reform

The 14 February government reorganisation marks a major development in Saudi internal politics. The recent reshuffle can best be understood as less about political reform than about institutionalisation and expanding state control. King Abdullah is an absolute monarch in name, but governing in the kingdom requires delicate balancing among numerous interest groups.

In this case, all may not be as it seems at first glance. For instance no policy changes at the Ministry of Higher Education have yet been reported [in relation to combating extremist literature] and several individuals who were replaced have retained other important positions. The impact of these changes will be watched quite closely, especially the elevation of Prince Nayef to deputy prime minister. Internal royal family politics have traditionally been and remain closed to outsiders, and it is too early to fully understand what impact these moves will have on the future of the country. ■

Further Analysis

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