

MEI REMEMBERS

No. 11

Monday, 26 January 2015



**King Abdullah bin
Abdul-Aziz al-Saud**

(1925 – 2015)

By

MEI TEAM

Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud, the architect of unprecedented and much needed reforms in Saudi Arabia, breathed his last in Riyadh on Friday, 23 January 2015. In him, the Kingdom lost its reformer-King. Abdullah ruled over one of the most turbulent times in the history of Saudi Arabia and was hailed as one of the tallest Arab-leaders of his time. He was battling several health issues since 2010 and was admitted to King Abdul-Aziz Medical City on 2 January after reportedly developing breathing problems where he was diagnosed with pneumonia leading to the death. A popular leader Abdullah rose to prominence within the Al-

Saud through strong ties among several tribes and influence in the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG). He commanded over the SANG since 1963 and was appointed the Second Deputy Prime Minister by King Khalid upon the death of King Faisal in 1975. He became Crown Prince in 1982 upon the death of King Khalid and ascended the throne on 2 August 2005 after the death of King Fahd. Though he was monarch for ten years, effectively he ruled as regent since 1996 after Fahd's debilitating stroke.

As per Saudi-Islamic traditions no official mourning was declared but the grief among the population was evident. The twitterati was buzzing with the news of death while official announcements were awaited. It came within an hour and half but uncertainties looming over succession had kept the netizens busy. The raging problems in the neighbourhood, particularly the rise of Islamic State and new developments in Yemen added to the problem at hand. Crown Prince (now King) Salman acted swiftly to end all speculations; he ascended the throne while half-brother Muqrin took over as Crown Prince. The same day within a gap of a few hours King Salman appointed nephew Muhammad bin Nayef, the Minister of Interior, as Deputy Crown Prince and Second Deputy Prime Minister. This also cleared the air over the passing of the baton to the next generation and this paved the way for first grandson of Ibn Saud to become the ruler. It can be anybody's guess what role the departed King or the Allegiance Council played in the swift decisions, but it gives a strong indication that the Al Saud recognize the enormity of the problems and wish to remain united despite competitions among the rival groups within the family.

On the same day, another royal decree announced the appointment of King Salman's son Muhammad as Minister of Defence and head of the Royal Court while Khalid al-Tuwaijri a long-time aid of Abdullah was relieved of his duties. The Friday sermons in mosques announced the new developments and while emphasizing on the Islamic code of obeying the ruler urged all Saudis to pay allegiance to the new King as the 'people with authority and power'[1] to choose the ruler have chosen Salman and Muqrin to rule over the country.

King Abdullah would be remembered for a number of achievements, significantly for his deft handling of the relations with the US after the September 2001 terror attacks and his management of the Arab Spring and its after-effects. Both posed major challenges to stability of Saudi Arabia. He will also be remembered for his reform initiatives particularly in the field of education towards improving the condition of women. His other initiatives included measures to strengthen political institutions such as the cabinet and *Majlis al-Shura* and streamline the judiciary. Other significant initiatives included national and inter-faith dialogues. The national dialogue gained praise even from ardent critics while his efforts at interfaith dialogue attracted international attention. His counter-terror strategy at home and partnership in US 'war on terror' was hailed at home and abroad for dealing effectively with terrorist organizations, particularly al-

Qaeda but also produced new enemies in the form more radicalized and brutal Islamist groups such as Islamic State.

On the other hand, the handling of political situation at home invited criticisms for human rights violations and many argued that Saudi counter-terrorism methods act as tool for suppression of political dissent. In fact, Abdullah like his predecessors did not hesitate in weeding off any political expression that seemed to challenge the existing authority. Nonetheless, under his rule the political situation remained stable leading to economic growth and some social progress.

King Abdullah took keen interest in regional politics. One of his major regional initiatives was the Abdullah Peace Plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though it failed to get enough support to make any difference. Under Abdullah Saudi Arabia became more assertive in its foreign policy. This became very evident with its active involvement in regional politics after the breaking up of Arab Spring protests, especially in Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya.

King Abdullah's death evoked grief among Saudis and many expressed their love for him through social media while the newspaper columns remembered him and his achievements fondly, particularly his efforts towards educational reforms and opening newer opportunities to women in public life. Indeed, the massive educational expansion and improved opportunities for women during the last two decades are important achievement of his leadership. One Saudi columnist, Fatima Muhammad, termed his rule as the 'golden era' for Saudi women (*Saudi Gazette* 23 January). Among his legacies is the Abdullah Scholarship Program that helped thousands of students to study abroad and helped them acquire better education and improve their socio-economic conditions. One of the beneficiaries Zohoor Asiri expressed her shock and said it would have been impossible for her to study medicine in Hungary without this scholarship and that King Abdullah will always be remembered for this program (*Arab News* 24 January). Moreover, his efforts for expansion of the two holy mosques have been praised by Muslims all over the world.

International reactions indicated Saudi Arabia's rising profile among the world powers and Abdullah's international standing. One of the first to react was President Barack Obama who said "As a leader, he was always candid and had the courage and convictions....One of those convictions was his steadfast and passionate belief in the importance of the Saudi-US relationship as a force for stability and security in the Middle East and beyond." Other world and regional leaders including UN Secretary General Ban-ki Moon, China's President Xi Jinping, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Francois Hollande, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin too sent their condolence messages and praised the King for his leadership. Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted his condolence message saying "News of King Abdullah's passing away is saddening." In him "we have lost an important voice who left a

lasting impact on his country.” India also declared a day of state mourning on 24 January while Vice-President M Hamid Ansari led official delegation to attend the condolence in Riyadh.

In Abdullah’s death Saudi Arabia has lost a visionary leader. He was a respected at home and abroad. Despite the loss and the vacuum his departure has created, Saudi Arabia is expected to continue with his policies under the new leadership. King Salman in his maiden address promised to continue with his predecessor’s policies. He will have to effectively respond to the rising aspirations of the youth while keeping intact the traditional support base.

King Abdullah’s funeral prayer was offered in Riyadh’s Imam Turki bin Abdullah Mosque on Friday after *Asr* (afternoon) prayer and was led by Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul-Aziz al-Sheikh. Abdullah was buried at the Al-Oud Cemetery situated in the heart of Riyadh and where all the former Saudi kings were buried. All members of the royal family and local leaders, ulema and large number of common people as well as many leaders from the Gulf, Arab and Muslim countries attended the funeral prayer and burial.

Note: 1. The term used in the sermon was *ahl al-hal wa al-aqd* which can be broadly understood as Sharia terminology to denote political and religious elites.

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