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Hard-liner now next Saudi heir

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Saudi Arabia's ruling monarchy moved into a critical period of realignment Saturday after the death of the heir to the throne opened the way for a new crown prince: most likely a tough-talking interior minister who has led crackdowns on Islamic militants but also has shown favor to ultraconservative traditions such as keeping the ban on women voting.

A state funeral is planned for Tuesday in Riyadh for crown prince Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, who died Friday in New York at the age of 80 after an unspecified illness, the official Saudi news agency said.

Now, Saudi rulers are expected to move quickly to name the new king-in-waiting — which royal protocol suggests will be Sultan's half brother, Prince Nayef.

Moving Nayef to the top of the succession ladder would not likely pose any risks to Saudi Arabia's pro-Western policies and, in particular, its close alliance with Washington, D.C.

But Nayef cuts a much more mercurial figure than Saudi's current leader, the King Abdullah, who has nudged ahead with reforms such as promising women voting rights in 2015 and the rumblings from the



HASSAN AMMAR / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, shown here in 2010, died Friday in New York at the age of 80.

country's powerful religious establishment.

Nayef, 78, has earned U.S. praise for unleashing the internal security forces against

the West for a 2002 interview that quoted him as saying "Zionists" — a reference to Jews — benefited from the 9-11 attacks because it turned world opinion against Islam and Arabs.

Nayef also has expressed displeasure at some of Abdullah's moves for more openness, saying in 2009 that he saw no need for women to vote or participate in politics. It's a view shared by many Saudi clerics, who follow a strict brand of Islam known as Wahhabism. Their support gives the Saudi monarchy the legitimacy to rule over a nation holding Islam's holiest sites.

"Nayef is more religious, and is closer to the Saudi groups who are very critical of the king's decisions regarding women and other steps he's taken to balance out the rigid religious practices in society," said Ali Fakhr, a political analyst and commentator in Bahrain.

But it remains doubtful that Nayef — if ever made king — would outright annul Abdullah's reforms, which include the establishment of a coed university where both genders can mix. More likely, Nayef would put any further changes on hold, said Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, a political-affairs professor at Emirates University.

"It's not good news for Saudis or for the region," he said. "The kingdom is a mix of different groups, and it's not good news for the kingdom as a whole."

guy. He is the mukhabar (secret police) guy. He is the internal-affairs guy."

Although it's not certain Nayef will be selected successor, the signpost clearly in that direction.

After Sultan fell 11 months ago, Nayef was named second deputy prime minister, traditionally a post right behind the crown prince. For the first time, however, the mechanism of picking the next crown prince was not entirely clear.

Traditionally, the king names his successor. But this time it is possible Abdullah will put the decision to the Allegiance Council, a 33-member body composed of his brothers and cousins. Abdullah created the council and gave it a mandate to choose the heir.

Abdullah formed the council in order to modernize the process and give a wider voice. It was decided the council would choose the heir for the first time when Sultan rose to the throne, and his crown prince would need to be named. But it was not specified whether it would be used if Sultan died before the king.

Sultan is survived by 32 children from multiple wives. They include Bandar, the former ambassador to the United States who now heads the National Security Council, and Khaled, Sultan's assistant in the Defense Ministry.

Saudi Arabia has been ruled since 1953 by the sons of its founder, King Abdul-Aziz, who had more than 40 sons by multiple wives. Sultan was part of the aging second generation of Abdullah-Aziz's sons, including Nayef, the full brother of the late King Fahd, who died in 2005.

While Nayef has taken only minor roles in foreign affairs, he has been outspoken in one of Saudi Arabia's chief regional concerns: ambitions by rival Iran to expand its influence in the Middle East.

Nayef was involved in the kingdom's decision in March to send military forces into neighboring Bahrain to help crush pro-reform demonstrations led by tiny island nation's majority Shiites against its Sunni rulers — which Gulf Arab leaders accuse of having ties to Iran.

With Yemen, he has called for Saudi Arabia to take a harder line with embattled President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was treated in Saudi Arabia after surviving a blast in June and later returned to