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Saudi Prince Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz Explains the New Method of Determining Future Kings in Saudi Arabia

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*Following are excerpts from an interview with **Saudi Prince Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz**, which aired on Al-Arabiya TV on January 12, 2007.*

Interviewer: Saudi Arabia announced, through its ruler, King Abdullah, the establishment of “the Allegiance Authority,” which would determine the details of the regulatory code for the selection of the crown prince. You were one of the participants in the meeting held in Mecca. Who was present at the meeting, Your Highness? Was it the Family Council, or only the sons of King Abd Al-'Aziz?

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Interviewer: Not within the jurisdiction of of the Family Council?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: That's right. The Family Council, as I've said before, is responsible only for the internal affairs of the family, and has nothing to do with the institutional affairs of the state or even of the family. Most of the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz participated in the meeting...

Interviewer: How many were present?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: 16 or 17, I think.

Interviewer: How many sons are still living?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: 21.

Interviewer: So 4 or 5 were absent?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: About 6.

Interviewer: Why were they absent?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Because they were away or sick.

[...]

Interviewer: Did you, the sons of King Abd Al-'Aziz, know about the Allegiance Authority before the meeting?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Some of them knew in principle that King Abdullah was considering the establishment of something of the sort, but the details of the idea that was taking shape in his mind, and what he was going to do – this was a surprise for everybody.

[...]

I was surprised that in the clarification memorandum that was read to us, the issue of the constitutionality of the regulatory code was mentioned. The word “constitutionality” was used. As you know, this word was taboo and this was the first time it was used. I was pleased about this, because there is confusion among some people, who think a constitution takes the place of the Koran and the Sunna, which is not true. As you know, any Saudi who is familiar with the situation in Saudi Arabia can establish a constitution, a regulation, or a law that runs counter to the Islamic *Shari'a*.

[...]

Interviewer: After King Abd Al-'Aziz died, everyone swore allegiance to King Abdullah (*sic*). It was the sons of King Abd Al-'Aziz who selected King Abdullah, because he was Crown Prince. This was only natural.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: The world has changed. The days of King Abd Al-'Aziz, and Saud after him, and then Faysal, Khaled, Fahd, and Abdullah... The world has changed. We've entered the 21st century. There must be a regulated procedure.

[...]

Interviewer: I was talking to you before we began the recording, and you said that the sons of King Abd Al-'Aziz are similar to a board of directors of Saudi Arabia.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: That's right.

Interviewer: Forgive me, Your Highness, but don't you think that turning the state into a company weakens it? Board of directors generally exist in companies. Companies – even if they are well organized – are generally governed by an economic mentality.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: I used this image so that people would understand exactly what I mean. The family as a whole is like a general assembly. Here, again, we return to the image of a company. There is nothing shameful about this analogy. There are oil companies, like Aramco, which are giant corporations that equal the government in their activities, finances, and management. The family as a whole is like a general assembly. I used this analogy so that people would understand. The sons of Abd Al-'Aziz and the sons of his sons constitute the backbone of this family, because the king comes from their midst.

Interviewer: The sons of Abd Al-'Aziz, and the sons of his sons?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes. That was determined in the regulations of King Fahd...

Interviewer: The ruler comes from their midst...

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes.

Interviewer: The offspring of Abd Al-'Aziz.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Exactly.

Interviewer: I did not read anywhere that the rule should be in the hands of the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz, and when they are gone, the turn of the sons of his sons will come. If the members of the Allegiance Authority, chosen by the king, select one of "the sons of the sons" – and may you all have a long life...

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: That is a very important question. As long as one of the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz is still alive and is fit to be king, then, according to my understanding...

Interviewer: Fit or the fittest?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Fit... or the fittest... Whatever...

Interviewer: This means that the selection is meaningless.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: No, no. For example, when the choice is made, a member of the Authority will say: "We chose so-and-so"... This is my personal opinion, and that's why I want the clarification memorandum - in the future, not now. Is it conceivable [that the Authority] will select so-and-so, without explaining his qualities to us? Is it conceivable for so-and-so to be nominated, without us being told about his background and his view of the future? This is just an example.

Interviewer: But the regulatory code does not state that someone can nominate people. It says the king will present candidates to the [Authority] members, and if he doesn't, they will present the three names.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes, yes. At any rate, it is the king's prerogative, but there will also be a vote...

Interviewer: Over the king's candidates...

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes.

Interviewer: Over the person...

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes, over one of the three. And if they object to all three, they choose one of themselves.

Interviewer: Who will choose one of them?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: The Authority.

Interviewer: What if the king nominates one person, but they don't vote for him?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Then they choose one of themselves.

Interviewer: But if the king names as Crown Prince one of the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz or the sons of his sons...

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: The king will select one, two, or three. Let's assume he selects just one. If they do not accept him, they will select someone else.

Interviewer: They do not go back to the king to let him nominate someone else?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: This is not clear to me. I am talking about a case in which they select a certain person. They have to explain to us why they selected that specific person. Even if the name came from the king, as one of the three, we must ask questions, because we have a responsibility before Allah and the Saudi people, right? Why was this person nominated? What are his qualities?

[...]

I do not recall anybody objecting to the principles of the regulatory code, but people did talk about the mechanisms. Ultimately, these mechanisms were agreed upon, and the king was adamant about announcing this regulatory code.

[...]

Interviewer: You said that the Family Council has nothing to do with government matters.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Right.

Interviewer: What precisely are the duties of the Family Council?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: The family does not consist of only the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz. It includes his sons, as well as other branches of the family.

Interviewer: All the Al-Saud family?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: All the branches are represented.

Interviewer: All those who are descendants of Muhammad ibn Al-Saud?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: For example, Muhammad bin Saud... Is it Muhammad bin Saud, or Saud, because they are called the Saud family... Those [on the Family Council] are the Saud family, not only descendants of Muhammad bin Saud.

Interviewer: Saud bin Muhammad?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes, Saud bin Muhammad... No, Muhammad bin Saud... They are descendants of the first Saud.

Interviewer: The founder of the Saudi state?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes. There are 18 members on the Family Council. Nine of them are sons of Abd Al-'Aziz, and the other nine belong to the other branches of the family.

[...]

Interviewer: So the political role is restricted to the king, the crown prince, and the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes, that's how It is supposed to be...

Interviewer: Why do you say "supposed to be"?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Look, I have said this on several occasions. There is confusion between the state and the government. The state means all the institutions. It means the land and eveis is the state. Beyond that, the authorities are divided. There is an executive branch, which is the government, a legislative branch, and a judicial branch. We... the family reigns and rules, OK? Who rules on behalf of the family? The sons of Abd Al-'Aziz – as a state – and the sons of his sons. The people who fulfill governmental positions have executive authorities. It is a part of the state. The others are the backbone of the state, not of the government. The backbone of the government is the cabinet of ministers. It is composed of people from Hail, Hijaz, Riyadh...

Interviewer: All government members are equals, whether they are part of the family or not.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: And some of them are the sons and grandsons of Abd Al-'Aziz. So we must distinguish between the state and the government. Therefore, I always say that the nerve center of the state are the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz and the sons of his sons.

[...]

Interviewer: So we can say that as far as the Allegiance Authority is concerned, there has been no change regarding the identity of those who rule. The people who will rule are the same people determined by law. The sons of Abd Al-'Aziz.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: And the sons of his sons.

Interviewer: The Allegiance Authority determined only the mechanism of selecting the ruler.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Exactly.

Interviewer: According to some analyses, this provides a new opportunity for the next generation.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes. Yes, it is very important. It is a basic step.

Interviewer: Although you say that as long as even one of the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz...

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: If even one of them is fit, he is first in line to rule.

Interviewer: Did the Allegiance Authority cancel the position of Second Deputy?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes, it did.

Interviewer: You think it did?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: That's my opinion.

[...]

Interviewer: What is the future of the Allegiance Authority?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: That is an important question. I hope it will be a permanent authority, not just for the sons of Abd Al-'Aziz. I hope it will be permanent... I don't think this point was discussed.

Interviewer: According to the regulatory code, it is permanent, not temporary. It doesn't say anywhere that it is temporary...

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Will this regulatory code apply to the sons of the sons of those living today?

Interviewer: You mean the sons of the grandsons?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Yes. After all, there is continuity. These things will be explained in the clarification memorandum, because this Authority is permanent and good, and there is no need for anyone to change it whenever they feel like it.

Interviewer: In other words, you propose that the rule be restricted to the male offspring of King Abd Al-'Aziz?

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Let's assume that there no more sons of Abd Al-Aziz, and no more of the sons of his sons who live today. What then?

Interviewer: It is clear that the regulatory code stated that the rule would be in the hands of the men, and it did not mention the issue of the women.

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Women? Of course not.

Interviewer: I am just asking, because this was one of the interpretations...

Talal bin Abd Al-'Aziz: Our women are not ready to become queens. It's too early for them.