



Policy Focus 96

After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia

[*Simon Henderson*](#)

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The relationship between Riyadh and Washington affects a range of U.S. foreign policy interests including Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Middle East peace process, and energy. Indeed, Saudi Arabia maintains strategic regional standing as well as leadership roles in international energy markets and global Islamic affairs.

But within the next few years, Saudi Arabia is likely to witness dramatic leadership changeovers. King Abdullah, at eighty-six, is already older than any of his predecessors. Since the character of the U.S.-Saudi relationship has often, over the years, been dictated by the personality and style of the Saudi king, the views of potential successors should be of intense interest to policymakers in Washington.

In this new Washington Institute Policy Focus, Saudi expert Simon Henderson explores the likely consequences of King Abdullah's 2006 decision to form an Allegiance Council of senior princes with a potential role in choosing future crown princes. From within this context, the study recommends steps that the United States can take to accommodate the kingdom's leadership changes and to limit any resultant instability. Henderson draws on private interviews of U.S. and British officials, former diplomats, military advisors, and oil company executives with direct knowledge of the Saudi royal family. Numerous appendices include a 270-year chronology of Saudi history, a chart of the maternal linkages among the sons of Abdulaziz, the current composition of the Saudi ulama, and excerpts from the Saudi Basic Law of Governance.

After King Abdullah updates Henderson's seminal 1994 Washington Institute Policy Paper [*After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia*](#), an examination of King Fahd's then newly codified Saudi succession rules. Like its predecessor, *After King Abdullah* is sure to become the definitive work on the subject of Saudi succession.

Downloadable Appendices

- [Saudi Royal Succession Chart](#)
- [Saudi Arabia's Borders and Administrative Boundaries](#)
- [Maternal Linkages among the Sons of King Abdulaziz \(PDF\)](#)

THE AUTHOR

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the [Gulf and Energy Policy Program](#) at The Washington Institute. A journalist for twenty-one years with London's *Financial Times* and a former foreign correspondent for the BBC, he reported from Iran during the 1979 Islamic revolution and seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran. Mr. Henderson writes and appears frequently in the media, discussing the internal political dynamics of Saudi Arabia, energy issues, the conservative Arab Gulf states, and Pakistan's nuclear program. His other recent Washington Institute publications include [The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy](#); [Reducing Vulnerability to Middle East Energy Shocks: A Key Element in Strengthening U.S. Energy Security](#) (with Patrick Clawson); and [Energy in Danger: Iran, Oil, and the West](#).

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