

Saudi Arabia on the Verge of a Transitional Period

by [Sarah Yizraeli \(/experts/sarah-yizraeli\)](/experts/sarah-yizraeli)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Sarah Yizraeli \(/experts/sarah-yizraeli\)](/experts/sarah-yizraeli)

Sarah Yizraeli was the Meyerhoff Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute in 1998.



Brief Analysis

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King Fahd's recent illness, including hospitalization from March 9 through 11, are reminders of his frail health and aging years. Fahd, born in 1921, suffered a stroke in November 1995. Since then he has had difficulties in concentration for any stretch of time and in his short-term memory. It seems likely that sooner rather than later, the Saudi top leadership will change.

It has been assumed that Fahd will maintain the kingship until his death, but this may change if his health deteriorates further. At the same time, Crown Prince Abdullah is likely to assume more power. In the past two years, Fahd ceded more authority to Abdullah, who has basically been running the kingdom's daily affairs. Nevertheless, major policies have been decided upon by the King and his close entourage, or as a result of prior consultations among the King, the Crown Prince and the Minister of Defense Prince Sultan, who is almost certain to be the next Crown Prince.

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Relations within the Royal Family

Lacking full brothers to support him inside the royal family, Abdullah will continue his unwritten alliance with the family of the late King Faysal, i.e., Foreign Minister Prince Sa'ud and his brother Prince Turki, the head of the intelligence service. Abdullah will also try to promote princes from less important families and to co-opt them into his government to increase his political strength and to balance that of the seven Sudayris (Fahd and his six brothers and their families).

Regardless of his popularity, non-corrupt image, and long years in key positions of power, Abdullah is less experienced than Fahd or even Sultan in foreign policy and international affairs. This weakness will probably lead Abdullah to rely on Sa'ud, but also might lead to somewhat volatile and inconsistent policies. This could lead to

friction with Sultan, who does not always share the viewpoints of Abdullah and Sa'ud in domestic affairs, inter-Arab relations, and foreign policy.

Abdullah and Sultan will have to reach an agreed division of authority or an arrangement for power-sharing. The extent to which they will succeed in reaching such an arrangement and abide by it will determine their ability to handle the state affairs through cooperation. One of the signals for some power-sharing arrangement may come if both will give up their command on the two military forces—the National Guard and the armed forces headed respectively by Abdullah and Sultan. There is no past precedent in the kingdom of a king practicing at the same time direct control on a military force. Given the pragmatic character of the royal family the precedent may be changed, especially if Sultan will insist on maintaining control over the armed forces.

Both Abdullah and Sultan are in their seventies. Given their advanced ages, they are unlikely to rule for long. Sooner or later they will have to decide who the princes are that will succeed them. The old formula of "seniority and ability," according to which princes were promoted, is no longer valid in the current political culture of Saudi Arabia. Fahd's edict of 1992 broadened the options for succession also to the generation of Ibn Sa'ud's grandsons by making them eligible for the throne and thus giving preference to ability over seniority. Before long, there will have to be a transitional period during which power is passed to a younger generation of princes. Among the prominent candidates to succeed Sultan, the next crown prince, are his brothers 62-year old Prince Salman—the governor of Riyadh since 1962 (like Sultan, one of the seven Sudayri brothers) and 57-year old Sa`ud al-Faysal—the incumbent foreign minister since 1975 and son of the late King Faysal. These controversial decisions will probably involve the broader royal family, whose concern will be to guarantee the continued monopolization of power by the family. The royal family will probably strive to keep the internal balance among its various factions, while designating the most capable prince for leadership.

Saudi Policies under Abdullah

Domestic reforms.

Despite some expectations that Abdullah will address the demand for a greater democracy through enlarged political participation, no significant change of the Saudi system is expected. Abdullah, like his predecessors, will retain the power monopoly of the royal family. He is unlikely to enlarge political participation and the authority of the consultative assembly (Majlis al-Shura), because that might eventually undermine the authority of the royal family. However, he will address the more popular demand for a fairer distribution of the kingdom's wealth. While a genuine political reform will be delayed, Abdullah will most likely confront the problem of high-level corruption by curtailing princely perks and other privileges and by insisting on budgetary accountability.

Relations with Gulf states.

Abdullah will pursue his initiative to improve relations with Iran, partly in order to balance Iraq and its aspirations in the Persian Gulf and partly in hope to mitigate Islamic extremism. In due course and under certain political conditions, he might be more amenable to Iranian proposals for some regional security arrangements. This may cause some disagreements with the United States regarding the responsibility for safeguarding the Gulf and the flow of oil. However, he will continue to support the U.S. insistence that Iraq should comply with all United Nations Security Council resolutions. Unlike King Fahd, Abdullah will probably make more efforts to improve relations and promote cooperation within the GCC but with no assurances for better chances of success.

Arab-Israeli peace process.

Despite his pro-Syrian image (resulting from his marriage to Rifaat Asad's sister in law), Abdullah has shown openness to any attempt at solving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Since the early 1980s, he has supported almost all the initiatives to promote a peace process between the Arabs and Israel. He has been consistent in his view that

ultimately the Palestinians should establish their state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as their capital; and that Israel should withdraw from all territories it occupied in 1967, including the Golan Heights. Nevertheless, he has not been consistent regarding the question whether the United States or the UN should sponsor the peace process, and whether this process should end in a peace treaty. Eventually, Abdullah will continue the broader lines of the Saudi policy towards Israel, opposing overt or covert contacts with Israel until further progress in the peace process has been achieved. Afterwards, he may show willingness to some kind of diplomatic and economic relations with Israel.

Relations with the United States.

Like his predecessors, Abdullah will continue to rely on the United States to secure the House of Sa'ud and Saudi Arabia's integrity. But unlike Fahd, he will demand a relationship based on mutual interests and not on what can be perceived as automatic Saudi acquiescence to political or economic dictates by the United States. It is reasonable to assume that Saudi relations with the United States during his kingship will be patterned on the same model that he has used during the last twenty years as commander of the National Guard; the Guard relies heavily on U.S. advisors and equipment. This attitude, together with his expected Gulf policy may push Abdullah to adapt a more independent policy regarding the U.S. global and regional security policy.

Minor changes in orientation and policy are expected under Abdullah as king. These will take the shape of policy adjustments and modifications, resulting either from changing regional conditions or from Abdullah's preferences. Abdullah will use his credibility with the conservative princes and Islamist and tribal groups to address some of their grievances. He will make attempts at rebuilding an inter-Arab safety belt for Saudi Arabia, especially in the Persian Gulf, and decrease Saudi overt dependence on the United States. He will also urge the United States to adopt a policy that puts relations with Israel on the same level as relations with Arab countries.



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