

# King Fahd's Illness and the Challenges to U.S. Policy

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## Brief Analysis

**S**peculation about the health of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia has been rife ever since the news last week that he had been taken into the hospital for "some ordinary medical check-ups." The absence of any information of what might be wrong was matched by a flurry of goodwill messages from Arab leaders, which seemed to indicate that they somehow knew he was seriously ill.

Since then, Saudi officials have admitted that the 74-year old monarch had had a fainting spell and had been advised to rest, although members of his family went into the hospital in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, for lunch with him on Saturday. The Reuters news agency quoted a source as saying the king was "in good form" with his family. Later he was shown on Saudi television, lying on his hospital bed, nodding at a couple of visitors, but the shot was so brief that it was impossible to gauge his health.

The contradictions in the reports show the degree of Saudi sensitivity to any question regarding the health of the king. There has been no official comment on the report that he has had a stroke, although western officials believe this to be the case and privately have described his condition as "serious." (Indeed, a medical team from the U.S. has flown out to help.) Aware of this sensitivity, State Department officials have been ultra-cautious in their comments, not wanting to upset the most important U.S. ally in the Gulf.

## Illness and Succession

At the root of Saudi concerns appears to be the fear that King Fahd will not recover sufficiently to resume his official duties. This is new territory for the succession mechanism of Saudi Arabia, where the throne passes down the line of the sons of Ibn Saud, the founder of the kingdom, provided the next candidate is "a good Muslim" and "is fit and able." The process has experienced death by natural causes, deposition because of incompetence, and death by assassination; however the country might be unnerved by having to take away the title of king from a man who is much loved and respected for his leadership skill, noticeable during years of government experience, even before he became king in 1982.

With the post of king also goes the job of prime minister and the title of "custodian of the two holy places," for the Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina are holy to all Muslims. A king's personal involvement is crucial, for although Saudi decisionmaking is usually by consensus, it is the king's job to decide whether the consensus has been sufficiently

reached or whether an awkward decision should be postponed. There was consequently a flurry in the oil markets at the end of last week because of rumors of his death, which might mean a change in Saudi oil policy. As the world's largest oil exporter and with a quarter of the world's oil reserves, Saudi Arabia's pricing and production policy is critical.

King Fahd has also been pivotal to U.S. security policy in the Persian Gulf, even before 1990/91, when forces of the United States and its allies defended the kingdom and then pushed Iraqi forces out of neighboring Kuwait. Although the conservative Islamic nature of Saudi society has made it impossible for Fahd to have a formal base agreement with the U.S., rotating military units (including a 60 aircraft composite air wing) have effectively ensured a permanent military presence.

Abdullah -- Heir Apparent

For the moment, King Fahd's duties are being performed by Crown Prince Abdullah, who today went to the summit conference in the Omani capital, Muscat, of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the regional grouping of the conservative Gulf Arab states which, apart from Saudi Arabia and Oman, includes Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. But although heir apparent, Abdullah is himself 72 years old, and before he could become king, he would need to win the approval of his 24 half-brothers, the surviving sons of Ibn Saud. There are already indications that some members of the family consider Abdullah too old to become king, and that the job should go to someone younger, perhaps skipping thirteen brothers to Prince Salman -- the governor of Riyadh and a full brother of Fahd -- who is 59 and considered particularly able. (The Saudi princes best known to Americans -- the foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal; the ambassador in Washington, Bandar bin Sultan; and the investor, Al-Waleed bin Talal -- are not considered to be in the running, nor particularly influential in the decisionmaking process.)

But the Saudi royal family hates tough decisions and public controversy. So, should Fahd be incapacitated for any period of time, the family will probably settle for keeping him as titular king until his death, perhaps passing on the job of prime minister to Abdullah, who is already the first deputy prime minister. He would have to work in tandem with the next in line, Prince Sultan, 71, the defense minister and second deputy prime minister, as well as being another full brother to King Fahd. The issue of succession would effectively be postponed.

With less than full authority, Abdullah might find it difficult to arbitrate consensus among the senior members of the royal family. Without any full brothers of his own, he is thought to feel pressured by Fahd's full brothers, who also include the interior minister, Prince Nayef. One former U.S. diplomat in the kingdom used the expression "policy gridlock" to describe the potential situation. Although not as pro-American as Fahd, Abdullah realizes the kingdom's reliance on the U.S. -- he commands the National Guard which uses American advisors, some of whom were killed when a bomb exploded outside their facility in Riyadh last month. On other aspects of U.S. policy, he is probably less supportive, particularly the seeking of consensus in the peace process with Israel; in October he declared that "Jerusalem was an Arab and Muslim city and always would be." On oil policy, he has in the past recommended cut-backs in production in an effort to boost price.

But in the current circumstances there is little that Washington can do other than to let the Saudi royal family sort out matters for itself. Any attempt at pressure or interference could easily backfire with adverse consequences for western interests

Simon Henderson, a former visiting fellow of The Washington Institute, is the author of *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia* (Washington Institute Policy Paper, second edition, 1995). ❖

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