

After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia (2nd ed.)

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The ruling family of Saudi Arabia, one of the United States' most important allies in the Middle East, is heading for a crisis of leadership. Despite its modern infrastructure, paid for by huge revenues from oil exports, the kingdom's political system remains rooted in tribal structures that have scarcely evolved in the last several hundred years. Control remains tightly, although not always firmly, in the grip of the Al Saud clan. The process of succession is a murky system in which the throne passes down the line of King Fahd's many brothers, while members of the next generation watch tantalized, wondering what stroke of fate will eventually give them (or a cousin) power.

In this Policy Paper, Simon Henderson explores the prospects for the post-Fahd succession and provides the first in-depth analysis of the impact of recent royal decrees and the possible role of the grandsons of the legendary Ibn Saud. Henderson concludes that due to the insularity of the royal family and its inbred fear of foreign encroachment on family prerogatives, Washington can only affect Saudi succession on the margins of the kingdom's internal decision-making process. In the interim, U.S. policymakers should take steps to prepare for any number of possible eventualities in a succession process whose outcome is not assured.

• 3 PAGES

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