

## Royal Flush

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### As they pay their respects to the House of Windsor, Arab royals may also catch a glimpse of their imperiled future.

**W**ith heavy rain expected in London on Friday, the royal wedding between Prince William and Kate Middleton could be a meteorological disaster. Rain or shine, it could also be a political catastrophe for the Arab royal families attending as guests. The affair will feature a total of eight Arab royals. By comparison, when the groom's father, Prince Charles, married his long-time "close friend," Camilla, in 2005, there were only four Arab royal guests. When Charles married Diana in 1981, there were just two.

With an estimated 2 billion people watching on television across the world, and another 400 million on the Internet, the royal wedding also promises to be a bold statement of defiance against the Arab Spring -- and clear proof of how much the Arab royals are out of touch.

So far, the anti-autocratic trend sweeping the Middle East has only overturned the leadership of republics -- Egypt and Tunisia. The governments next in line to fall are similarly non-monarchies -- Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Ignoring the fact that this could be a distinction without a difference, apologists for Arab royals have discreetly argued that kings and emirs "know" how to rule, and that traditional methods of the open-court "majlis" have made royals aware of public discontent before it boils over. Of course, the fact that they enjoy access to massive revenues from their energy deposits has also ensured that this process remains well oiled, so to speak.

The rich Arab monarchies are said to be scared stiff about the vulnerabilities of the less oil-rich thrones. Morocco worries them, as does the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Bahrain, too -- which is why Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sent security forces into the kingdom last month to boost the government of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa.

Some adjustments in the seating arrangements in Westminster Abbey are already in progress. On April 24, the *Gulf Daily News*, Bahrain's newspaper of record, announced that Bahraini Crown Prince Salman would be going to London for the event. The same day, it emerged that his trip was cancelled. With "deep regret," he announced his withdrawal due to fears that his presence would "overshadow" the event. There had been threats of (peaceful) protests in London against Bahrain's state of emergency, which was imposed in March after large-scale demonstrations threatened the Bahraini throne.

King Abdullah II of Jordan, although invited, is also not going to be in London, at least according to the published list. Whether this is because he doesn't want to leave his kingdom when Syrian tanks are laying siege to a town along the Syrian-Jordanian border or because he worries about the risk of too overt a display of the notorious regal extravagance of his wife, Queen Rania, is not clear.

The biggest contingent of Arab royals will be from the Arab Gulf states, and Salman's absence will be the only gap. The least populous state will have the most senior and also the largest presence: the giant frame of the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. (Sheikh Hamad is also the new owner of a London grocery and general store known as Harrods.) Kuwait will be represented by Interior Minister Sheikh Ahmad Hamoud al-Sabah, and the United Arab Emirates by Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who will be arriving from Washington following discussions about the Arab Spring with President Barack Obama.

Saudi Arabia will be represented by its ambassador in London, Prince Mohammed bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz, who will be accompanied by his wife, Princess Fadwa. (Will her face be covered? Probably not. Will there be TV coverage of her face? Probably not.) Prince Mohammed is a slightly surprising choice. Both Prince Turki al-Faisal, then the Saudi ambassador to Britain, and Prince Bandar bin Sultan came to Prince Charles's 2005 wedding; the British heir to the throne is also close to Prince Khalid al-Faisal, the governor of Mecca. Perhaps the House of Saud, still unsure whether it has completely stamped out popular discontent in the kingdom, was leery of sending one of those more high-profile royals.

The most appropriate representative will be from Oman: Sayyid Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, a relative of Sultan Qaboos and the country's minister of heritage and culture. Heritage, after all, is perhaps what this wedding is all about.

In Queen Rania's absence, the glamor in the Arab royal contingent will be provided by the wife of the emir of Qatar, the diamond-studded Sheikha Mozah, and the Moroccan representative, the red-haired Princess Lalla Salma, the wife of King Mohammed VI (who will be absent).

Let us hope it is a happy day for the bride and groom. To the Arab royals: Pay close attention to who you are sitting next to. The ruling European kings and queens now lead constitutional monarchies -- they only have formal, rather than political, power. Others no longer even have a throne. The king of Greece has lived in London since 1973. Simeon II, Bulgaria's one-time czar, returned to his homeland after the end of communism and served as an elected civilian prime minister from 2001 to 2005. Crown Prince Alexander of Yugoslavia no longer has a country.

As the Arab world struggles for change, this bunch must be wondering if, amidst the pomp and the grand but hollow titles of their European counterparts, they are also catching a glimpse of their future.

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