

Desert Schism:

Prince Nayef Bids for Saudi Throne

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On March 27, the official Saudi Press Agency issued a brief, surprise statement announcing that Interior Minister Prince Nayef had been appointed second deputy prime minister. This intriguing development has prompted widespread speculation that the conservative Prince Nayef will become crown prince when the incumbent -- the ailing Prince Sultan -- dies. The following day, however, a noted liberal senior prince, Talal, issued a statement questioning this assumption. If Nayef eventually becomes king, Saudi Arabia's hesitant steps toward reform will likely stop, and Washington's relations with Riyadh -- crucial for energy, financial, and regional policy -- would most likely be rockier than those with the current King Abdullah.

Outspoken and Controversial

Prince Nayef, who controls the kingdom's huge internal security apparatus, is notorious for speaking his mind. He most famously suggested that Israel's intelligence service, Mossad, was behind the September 11 attacks on the United States in which fifteen of the nineteen hijackers were Saudis. He later proposed that Americans visiting the kingdom should be fingerprinted like visitors to the United States. Just last week, a month after King Abdullah announced a series of reforms including the appointment of the first female deputy minister, Nayef publicly stated that he saw no need for either elections or women members of parliament. (Saudi Arabia's consultative Shura council has only male members, all appointed by the king. Limited, male-only, polls for some municipal councils took place in 2005.)

The Role of Second Deputy Prime Minister

In the Saudi system, the king is also prime minister, and his nominated successor, the crown prince, is deputy prime minister. King Faisal created the position of second deputy prime minister in 1968 when the then crown prince Khalid was uninterested in governing. Faisal gave the role to then Prince Fahd, effectively designating him crown prince in waiting. When Faisal was assassinated in 1975 by a nephew, the three roles were filled in order -- Khalid-Fahd-Abdullah. And upon Khalid's death in 1982, the leadership triumvirate became Fahd-Abdullah-Sultan. This pattern was broken upon Fahd's death in 2005, when King Abdullah pointedly did not nominate Nayef, the most

obvious candidate, to be second deputy prime minister, and the position ceased to exist. The main question among Saudi watchers for the last few years has been "Who is number three?" Now that question has been answered: it is Nayef.

Whither the Allegiance Council?

What has happened in the past, however, is no longer a clear indication of what will happen in the future. In 2006, King Abdullah established an Allegiance Council made up of his half-brothers (the sons of the kingdom's founder Abdulaziz, also known as Ibn Saud) and senior sons of those brothers who had died or were infirm. The declared role of the council was to help appoint a crown prince after Abdullah died and Sultan had become king. The council also provides a mechanism for appointing a new king if the monarch is incapacitated. Unofficially, the council is viewed as an attempt by Abdullah to break the claim to the throne by the so-called Sudairi faction, the largest group of full-brothers among Ibn Saud's sons, which include Sultan, Nayef, Salman (the governor of Riyadh province), and, until his death, Fahd. It is unclear whether the council, which has never met, could or would check Nayef's apparent ambition.

The Challenge of Talal

Prince Talal's March 28 statement, faxed to the Reuters news agency, put the issue succinctly: "I call on the royal court to clarify what is meant by this nomination and that it does not mean that he (Prince Nayef) will become crown prince." So far there has been no clarification and none is expected, but the move suggests intrigue and possible drama. Talal, the father of billionaire businessman Prince al-Waleed bin Talal, although considered eccentric, is viewed as a close ally of King Abdullah, who most likely approved of the statement. The speculation is that Abdullah was pressured by the Sudairi princes to make the appointment but now wants to diminish its significance.

The Health of Crown Prince Sultan

The biggest unknown is whether Sultan, currently undergoing medical treatment for cancer in New York City, is about to die, as is widely rumored. In recent months, Nayef and Salman have spent weeks with him there, but two weeks ago, when predictions of Nayef's appointment were first heard, Nayef declared his brother to be in "excellent and very reassuring" condition. Patently false, this can now be interpreted as Nayef seeking to block any premature replacement of Sultan for reasons of ill health until Nayef had secured the second deputy prime minister role. But the barely concealed enmity between some Saudi princes is matched by public utterances of loyalty to the institution of the Saudi state. The king need not fear a coup by Nayef while he is traveling this week, first to the Arab summit in Qatar and then to the G-20 meeting in Britain.

Challenges for Washington

Many U.S. officials have been unhappy at the prospect of Sultan becoming king because they believe his reputation for personal financial gain from weapons contracts would jeopardize the rule of the House of Saud. Nayef, whose son Muhammad now runs Saudi counterterrorism efforts and wins plaudits from Western officials for his efforts, presents a different challenge. A mercurial character, Nayef lacks a popular base, but despite not being a strict Muslim, has succeeded in attracting the backing of religious conservatives.

Given its claim to leadership of the Islamic and Arab world, and its balancing role in the world oil market, good relations with Riyadh have been deemed a vital U.S. interest by successive administrations. This week, King Abdullah is expected to demonstrate the kingdom's crucial role in global affairs; first, at the Arab summit in Doha, where he is likely to block Iranian influence in Syria and with Palestinian groups, then at the London G-20 meeting, where Saudi Arabia will be asked again to help boost the International Monetary Fund's reserves to help countries badly hit by the world economic crisis.

Careful management of U.S.-Saudi ties while this succession drama plays out will be vital. On the U.S. side, there is a problem finding the right personnel. The Obama administration has yet to appoint its envoy to Riyadh. Former CENTCOM commander Gen. Anthony Zinni was reportedly offered the job as a consolation prize for not securing the Baghdad post, but he rejected it. In the interim, Bush administration novice appointee, Ford Fraker, is still in the kingdom. On the Saudi side, there is the danger that key players will slip further into dotage or simply die. King Abdullah, who turns eight-six this year, is physically limited. He could not help but be reminded of his own mortality when he visited his brother Musaid in a Riyadh hospital on March 29. Musaid, born in the same year as Abdullah, is the eldest surviving son of Ibn Saud (but was passed over for the role of king). The only disagreement on the eighty-five-year-old Sultan's condition is whether his longevity is measured in weeks or months. Even Nayef (seventy-six) is reportedly unwell, suffering from leukemia.

Some used to say that understanding the often mysterious process of succession in Saudi Arabia was less important than knowing who the candidates are. Now, neither the process nor the likely successors are clear. Moreover, the princes next in line are so old that they are unlikely to be able to rule for more than a year or so. Coupled with open disagreements within the House of Saud, this greatly increases the chances for instability in one of the linchpins of the Middle East.

Simon Henderson is Baker fellow and director of the Washington Institute's [Gulf and Energy Policy program](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23>). He was the author of the institute's best-selling 1994 Policy Paper [After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=15) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=15>), currently being updated as [After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia](#). ❖

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