

# New Saudi Rules on Succession:

## Will They Fix the Problem?

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

**O**n October 20, 2006, eighty-three-year-old King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced changes to the kingdom's "Basic Law" -- effectively its constitution -- that appear to formalize procedures for the selection of future kings. However, it is difficult to know how much the current system of succession will actually change. For the foreseeable future, it is most likely that the world's largest oil exporter and the center of the Islamic world will still be led by an octogenarian, with the probability that his successor will be of similar age, and perhaps even infirm.

### Rules of Succession

The system of succession in Saudi Arabia is different from the primogeniture model followed by other Middle Eastern monarchies. When the founder of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Saud, died in 1953, he was indeed succeeded by his eldest son, Saud. However, Ibn Saud also named his second-eldest son, Faisal, crown prince. Since then the throne has passed from elder brother to the next in age -- and Ibn Saud had thirty-four sons who survived him, born to seventeen of his twenty-two wives. After Saud came his half-brother Faisal, then Khaled, then Fahd -- who died last year -- and, now, Abdullah. After Abdullah's younger half-brother Sultan, there are another twenty-one surviving sons. All are now probably grandfathers, if not great-grandfathers.

The new rules still restrict the throne to the sons and more than one hundred grandsons of the kingdom's founder, over the other approximately 6,000 princes of the larger al-Saud family, including the so-called "cadet branches" that have held occasional power in the 260-plus years since the al-Sauds initially seized power in central Arabia. In reality, though, the pool is smaller: those sons who are not genetically Arab are handicapped (at least five of Ibn Saud's sons had Armenian mothers); character, experience, popularity, and an appropriately pious practice of Islam also count.

Prior to the new rules, kings and crown princes were chosen by secret family conclaves of uncertain structure. On one occasion (Saud in 1964), such a conclave even deposed a monarch deemed unsuitable. In 1992, King Fahd declared that the monarch alone should choose the crown prince. Now, future crown princes will have to be approved by an "allegiance commission" made up of Ibn Saud's sons, the eldest sons of the brothers who have died

since Ibn Saud's death, as well as the sons of the current king and crown prince. This suggests a membership of around thirty-five (at least one brother did not produce a male heir). The decisionmaking will still happen in secret. The king will suggest three candidates; in the event of disagreement, there will be a vote. Apparently mindful of the precarious health of some of the princes, the new system also calls for a temporary council of five princes to lead the country if neither the king nor the crown prince is deemed fit to rule for medical reasons -- though defining such ill health could be a problem.

### The Next Kings

Observers have long tried to guess the identity of the next in line -- the crown-prince-in-waiting. The new rules open up the field. A few years ago, the guessing game was easy. Fahd was prime minister, Abdullah was first deputy prime minister, and Sultan was second deputy prime minister. But the latter post was not reassigned when Abdullah became king and made Sultan his crown prince. Indeed, the main challenger for that position, Interior Minister Prince Nayef -- a reportedly mercurial character -- appears to have been sidelined shortly after Fahd's death. It is said that the other senior princes permitted Nayef to retain his ministerial title while operational control of the powerful ministry itself was handed to his son, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef.

Now one is left to wonder whether or not King Abdullah has managed to outmaneuver the so-called Sudairi faction, which includes Sultan and Nayef as well as the former King Fahd. The largest group of full brothers among the sons of Ibn Saud, the Sudairis have often been seen as a factor restricting the authority of Abdullah (who has no full brothers), especially in 1995-2005 when he was crown prince and de facto monarch after Fahd fell sick. Yet the position of the Sudairis appears to remain strong. The new rules -- which essentially call for a vote to decide the most suitable crown prince if there is disagreement with the king's choice -- will not apply until after Sultan, age eighty-three and recovering from cancer, becomes king. With Nayef out of the picture, the most obvious contender for the throne -- despite a reported heart condition -- is seventy-year-old Salman, another Sudairi (the name is that of the mother's tribe) and the long-serving governor of the giant Riyadh province, where the capital is located.

Immediate Saudi public comment on the new rules is, as might be expected, laudatory: "momentous," "it will remove the uncertainty," "it will ensure the continuity of the ruling family." The announcement suggests both King Abdullah's concern about the kingdom's future leadership and his confidence in his current power within the al-Saud family. Safeguarding the king's grip on the new commission will be its secretary-general, the U.S.-educated Khaled al-Tuwaijri, who is also Abdullah's private secretary.

Time may test the patience of Ibn Saud's grandsons. Which ones will emerge as contenders remains to be seen. Ibn Saud's youngest son, Miqrin, sixty-three, is a former air force pilot and currently heads the Saudi external intelligence service. If he ever became king, the move to the next generation might be twenty years off. Of Ibn Saud's grandsons, arguably the most prominent, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, is plagued by poor health. Prince Turki, an ambassador in Washington, D.C., and former intelligence chief, is one possibility. Prince Bandar, now serving as secretary-general of the Saudi national security council, is probably disqualified because his mother was a slave girl; he also suffers from depression, according to a new biography. Sons of Fahd, Abdullah, Sultan, and perhaps Salman are also likely to hope for the role.

### Saudi Policy Debates Will Remain Veiled

Although Washington has grown accustomed to the glacial pace of change in the kingdom, it will want to see more steps taken to open up Saudi politics. Yet, under the new system, as under the old, Saudi policymaking is an exclusively royal prerogative, so changes will probably be part of the debates and negotiations undertaken by the new commission. Washington will have few ways of knowing about -- and little chance of affecting -- those discussions. This is a matter of concern because Saudi oil policy has worldwide implications, as does the kingdom's

approach to its leadership role in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. His publications include the 1994 Institute Policy Paper *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia*. ❖

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