

# Saudi Succession

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Articles & Testimony

**"T**he king is dead. God save the king!" is not quite how they say it in Saudi Arabia. But the Arabic and Islamic equivalent is going to be heard more often in the next few years. King Fahd was 84 when he died last summer. King Abdullah, who replaced him, is 83 this year. Crown Prince Sultan, the designated next-in-line, is 82. Although modern medical science means the al-Sauds are living longer (Fahd's longevity set a record), a rapid series of successions seems inevitable.

Is this important for the world? Yes. Saudi Arabia is a leader (along with Egypt) of the Arab world. It also sees itself as the leader of the Islamic world because of its "custodianship" of the two holy places, Mecca and Medina. And, of course, it has the world's largest oil reserves, reputedly a quarter of the world's total, and is the world's largest oil exporter. Whoever is king of Saudi Arabia--or acts in his name, as Abdullah did for nearly ten years while Fahd was unwell--is an immensely important decision-maker.

Saudi Arabia is much more than Kuwait, where the ruler died this month, even though the northern Gulf emirate has ten percent of the world's oil and is a significant exporter. It is certainly more than Dubai, whose ruler has also just died, the comparatively oil-less sheikhdom and traditional port which is transforming itself into a world-class, albeit a trifle too hot for most, vacation resort. But the successions in these places illustrate some of the problems of hereditary feudal quasi-monarchies: the new Kuwaiti emir is older than his deceased cousin and already incapacitated. The new ruler of Dubai is reputedly more able than his nominal superior, the ruler of Abu Dhabi, the senior and certainly richest statelet of the United Arab Emirates federation.

Senior Saudis sneer at any concern by outsiders about successions. The members of the House of Saud don't exactly say they have a plan. Instead, they call it a system. Succession might go to the next-in-line, provided he is healthy and has the relevant administrative experience. But if this is going to throw up the wrong person, then the senior princes will get into a huddle and tell the contender that the rules have just changed. This would seem to be what is going on now in the kingdom. The probable next in line after Sultan is generally considered to be Nayef, the interior minister. But Nayef is considered mercurial. (A survey in *The Economist* this month described him as "moody, abrasive, capricious and prone to intrigue." Presumably, if Nayef has been told what was written, one could now add "paranoid" as well.)

When Fahd died, Nayef was not made second deputy prime minister, the slot that has existed since 1968 for the crown-prince-in-waiting. Indeed, nobody was given the title although, arguably, such a job is needed even more now than previously. There are indications that Nayef bid for the job in the last few days of Fahd's life. Indeed, the announcement of Fahd's death might have been delayed a few days while a deal was being sought. The July 28 statement from the Interior Ministry spokesman that Fahd's health had "improved" is possibly noteworthy. (Fahd's death was announced on August 1, two months after he was taken into hospital with pneumonia.) Although Nayef's bid to become second deputy prime minister was clearly unsuccessful, it wasn't a complete failure since the post is left vacant.

In Saudi terms, the absence of a decision means no agreement or consensus was reached. The informed belief is that

a compromise candidate such as Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh province, will eventually emerge. Born in 1936, so a comparatively youthful 70 this year, he has the experience and respect. His major weakness is a question mark about his heart--two of his sons have already died of coronary failure.

Although in public and semi-public comments Western ambassadors profess optimism that the Saudi system of succession can cope, in private they can be more candid. Their views are worth listening to as their access to the House of Saud is greater than most. One recently explained his view that the real challenge would emerge in ten years time. This is when the reservoir of the sons of King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the kingdom in 1932, effectively dries up. After that the king will have to be chosen from the next generation, Abdul Aziz's grandsons. But which line will be chosen? Even among the Sudairis--Fahd, Sultan, Nayef and Salman all had the same mother--the competition will be intense.

Ten years hence is also when the flood of young Saudis produced by one of the highest birth rates in the world will bring about unprecedented strains on the higher education and employment market. Even if oil prices remain high, the budgetary strain will be immense. It will concern us all.

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