

## 'Saudi Brezhnevs'

Aug 3, 2005



Articles & Testimony

Important detail was missed in much of the reporting of the death of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia on Monday. Carried by the [Saudi Press Agency \(http://www.spa.gov.sa\)](http://www.spa.gov.sa), it was information in the new official biographies of the new King Abdullah and his designated successor, Crown Prince Sultan. Why does this matter? It is because both men are lying about their ages -- and age (of senior princes) is the key to understanding Saudi Arabia over the next few years.

When I wrote a book -- [After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=15\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=15) -- in 1994 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), I spent months checking the years of birth of the sons of King Abdul Aziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia, often known as Ibn Saud. Since his death in 1953, the kingdom has been ruled by his sons, in descending order of age. First Saud (1953-64), then Faisal (1964-75), then Khalid (1975-1982) and, most recently, Fahd (1982-2005).

Precise birthdates are usually unknown, just years of birth. In itself that has potential for confusion because Ibn Saud, by virtue of having four wives at any one time, sometimes fathered as many as three sons in the course of a year. (Ibn Saud had 22 wives during his lifetime; births of daughters are even more imprecisely recorded but, for the purposes of this discussion, do not count.) I am confident that I pinned down the real birth years of all 44 sons. (One British Arabist, close to the Saudi royal family, would only confirm correct years, crossing out wrong ones, and leaving me to do the extra research to correct my mistakes.) Fahd was born in 1921, Abdullah in 1923 and Sultan in 1924.

On Monday, the Saudi Press Agency said Fahd was born in 1923 and noted that Abdullah was born in 1924 and Sultan in 1930.

1930!? Sultan is just 75 this year! I must admit I laughed on reading this. For years I have noticed that Sultan has understated his age, but 1930 set a new record. In the Saudi system, age brings seniority, a key qualification for succession. But old age also suggests infirmity, a possible disqualifying factor. (Fahd's detached confinement to a wheelchair was an embarrassment that the royal family likely does not want to repeat.) Sultan appears to have been shaving years, allowing himself to slip below a couple of half-brothers who, by virtue of temperament or lack of qualifications, are not in the running for the leadership, but still retaining an edge over a bevy of contenders born in 1931. It is the Saudi metaphorical equivalent of hair dye, although Sultan's black hair is not genuine either (and a senior British official who met him recently said he was wearing makeup, too).

Do not expect much discussion of this issue. The House of Saud is sensitive to being caught out. Most media will veer away from a confrontation. Expect even less discussion on the health of the two men. Abdullah is said to be reasonably fit, but Sultan had stomach cancer last year -- the same senior British official who saw him said he then "looked like death" -- and now reportedly walks around with a colostomy bag.

So Saudi Arabia is facing a future of kings with short reigns. They will probably be dubbed "Saudi Brezhnevs," after the increasingly decrepit leadership in the final years of the Soviet Union. It was entirely predictable: 12 years ago, a

former British adviser to the Saudi royals preferred a Monty Python metaphor, "The parrots will fall off their perch in rapid succession."

The logical way around this problem is for the House of Saud to choose a significantly younger king -- although for him to be called a "Saudi Gorbachev" would give Riyadh heartburn. Within the line of sons of Ibn Saud, Interior Minister Prince Nayef (born 1933) and the governor of Riyadh Province, Prince Salman (born 1936), would be contenders. Dropping a generation is often mentioned, but would probably be too contentious -- which group of grandsons would benefit, to the consternation of their cousins?

Even this scenario could be upset by contenders dying "in the wrong order." When Sultan was thought to be on death's door last year, the U.S. war-gamed what would happen if he died before Fahd. The cautious conclusion was that Abdullah, described as leading the reformist wing of the House of Saud, would strengthen his position. This might have been wishful thinking.

Despite Abdullah's reputation for reform, the spectrum of differences on policy within the royal family is probably quite narrow. Personality differences and succession rivalries provide added frisson. Is cautious reform better than very cautious reform? And does reform actually mean change? The House of Saud knows it has to stand together. Oil policy is not contested. Nor is the Saudi leadership role in the Islamic world. Neither, frankly, is the need to maintain links with the U.S., despite this being inflammatory to Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda affiliates.

For the U.S. to involve itself in the succession process is high-risk, but the priorities of oil and improving Saudi cooperation in the war against al Qaeda are vital. Washington makes little secret of not wanting either Sultan or Nayef to become king. Neither is considered modern enough; both are thought to have made past compromises with al Qaeda to redirect the threat to the kingdom onto U.S. interests. But when U.S. Ambassador Robert Jordan reportedly suggested at a 2003 Riyadh dinner party that after Abdullah, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, a son of King Faisal, would be a good choice, there was uproar. Mr. Jordan was leaving anyway. Sultan and Nayef were probably glad to see the back of him.

Although the next generation like Saud al-Faisal are unlikely to gain power for a while, they could be kingmakers. Former ambassador to Washington Prince Bandar is also a player, as is his half-brother, Khalid, Saudi commander in Desert Storm. Both are sons of Prince Sultan. Saud al-Faisal's brother Turki is also significant -- he has just been nominated to replace Bandar in the U.S. But King Abdullah's son Mitab now has additional influence and could see himself as an emerging contender. All are rivals.

Another mainly overlooked news story on the Saudi Press Agency wire on Aug. 1 was titled "Royal Order." It said that King Abdullah had declared that "all current Cabinet members [would] continue in their present posts." So Abdullah retains the position of commander of the Saudi National Guard while Sultan is still minister of defense. The immediate issue for royal family politics is competition for a reallocation of cabinet posts and greater involvement of next generation princes.

Al Qaeda appeals to a section of Saudi public opinion because of resentment of the royal family's domination of power and business, as well as corruption. The next few years in the kingdom are going to be difficult enough anyway because of the declining years of Abdullah and Sultan. Gridlocked palace politics could turn instability into disaster.

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Wall Street Journal

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