

# From Paris to Crawford: Assessing Crown Prince Abdullah's Upcoming Visit

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



## Brief Analysis

On April 25, 2005, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia will meet with President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas. The de facto ruler of the world's largest oil exporter flies in from Morocco, where he has been vacationing after a three-day visit to France. While President Bush is expected to focus on rising energy costs, democratic reform in the Middle East, and the global war against terrorism, the crown prince is likely to emphasize the need for progress in the peace process and increased U.S. support for Palestinian statehood. The subtext to these discussions will be the health of the longstanding U.S.-Saudi relationship, which has been under strain since the September 11 attacks. Will the distance between the two allies diminish or increase?

## The Saudi Agenda

If recent signals from the Saudis are any indication, the talks could be tough. During a recent press briefing, one Saudi official predicted "frank talking" between the two leaders. The last time they met, in April 2002, Crown Prince Abdullah reportedly opened with a confrontational approach. He later told a Saudi newspaper that President Bush had "noble qualities" but was "not fully informed." Abdullah offered a hint of his current feelings in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Monde*, published on April 13, the day of his arrival in Paris. He lavished praise on President Jacques Chirac, whom he called "a unique man in our time, distinguished by his ethics, sincerity, friendship, humanitarianism, candidness, and warmth." By contrast, he stated that Saudi disagreements with the United States are "not with President Bush, whose positions have not changed, but with those around him." When asked about the status of the Saudi-U.S. relationship since the September 11 attacks, he replied, "What has changed is the position of the press. Most of the U.S. newspapers represent a category which you know well." He did not elaborate on the latter point.

Indications that Abdullah will focus on the peace process while in Crawford came immediately after his Paris visit. During an interview with a Lebanese satellite television channel, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal—Abdullah's nephew and, reportedly, closest advisor—stated that the crown prince would press for the so-called "Arab Peace Initiative" to be a "true supplement" to the Roadmap issued by the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the UN, and the European Union). The Arab Peace Initiative—which offers full recognition of Israel in return for a complete

withdrawal and includes ambiguous references to the issue of Palestinian refugees—is based on a concept floated by Abdullah and then adopted by the Arab Summit in Beirut in March 2002. Saudi Arabia worked to get the initiative re-adopted at the March 2005 Arab Summit in Algiers, although the impact of these efforts was arguably reduced because the Saudi leader himself declined to attend, citing unspecified personal reasons.

President Bush is likely to resist any formal link between this initiative and the Roadmap. For one thing, it could complicate Israel's planned disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank. Moreover, U.S. officials have been critical of Riyadh's unwillingness to become actively involved in diplomacy (including normalization with Israel) or to increase its financial support of the Palestinian Authority (which has remained niggardly despite an estimated \$20 billion increase in Saudi oil revenue in 2004).

#### The U.S. Agenda

The president has a plethora of concerns heading into the meeting, including Saudi views on terrorism, democratic reform, oil prices, and nuclear proliferation. The administration is also troubled by Crown Prince Abdullah's caution on Iraq (e.g., in the *Le Monde* interview, he stated "I do not see any benefit in war, and peace cannot be built on war") and Riyadh's lukewarm support for the former interim president of that country, Ghazi al-Yawar, a Sunni and longtime Saudi resident.

Although Washington is pleased by recent Saudi successes against al-Qaeda, it remains worried about the potential for Islamic militancy in the kingdom. U.S. nationals in Saudi Arabia remain vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Moreover, political reform, one of President Bush's favorite issues, has its own timeline in the kingdom. The third and final round of Saudi municipal elections was held yesterday in an atmosphere of rule-breaking by Islamists, who actively campaigned for votes among the all-male electorate despite the prohibition against such tactics.

Social reform has been similarly sluggish. The newly appointed Saudi education minister has a much more fundamentalist background than his predecessor. Moreover, Saudi officials spun last week's fatwa (religious edict) against forced marriages as a sign of progress, holding out the possibility of permitting women to drive as a potential next step. Although this may well come to pass eventually, it is unlikely in the short term: in November 2004, the Saudi ministry of interior stated that such a measure was "out of the question for the time being," and religious scholars have issued fatwas arguing that it is sinful for women to drive because it endangers family values.

The central and perhaps most sensitive U.S. concern is the future leadership of Saudi Arabia. The ailing King Fahd is eighty-four years old, and Crown Prince Abdullah is eighty-two. Current and former senior U.S. officials make little secret of their hope that neither Defense Minister Prince Sultan (eighty-one years old; he was seriously ill in 2004) nor Interior Minister Prince Nayef (seventy-two) become king as present succession rules dictate, preferring a younger monarch with a more modern outlook. The U.S. ability to influence succession is limited at best, while the opportunity for misunderstandings is immense. Although Abdullah's authority has been undercut by his rivals, Prince Sultan and Prince Nayef, he is likely to view any mention of the issue as yet another example of how the United States does not share his views on the Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia in particular.

#### Conclusion

The contrast between the Crawford and Paris meetings is likely to be great, leading to speculation that Riyadh might upgrade its relations with France to a strategic friendship rivaling its historic relationship with the United States. For example, a French news report published during Abdullah's visit claimed that the Saudis had conditionally agreed to purchase ninety-six French Rafale combat aircraft (worth up to \$15 billion). France is already a major supplier to the Saudi naval and air defense forces. (It should be noted that adding aircraft to the relationship would come at the expense of Britain, whose once-lucrative al-Yamamah contract has been in place for nearly twenty years. Such a switch in suppliers would help the Saudis make a point: Riyadh is furious that London has allowed a prominent

Saudi dissident, Saad al-Faqih—who the kingdom alleges was involved in an assassination plot against Crown Prince Abdullah—to live unhindered in Britain.) Indeed, the frank talk promised for the Crawford summit could well mark a turning point in U.S.-Saudi relations.

Simon Henderson is a London-based senior fellow of The Washington Institute.



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