

# Saudi Stability in the Shadow of the U.S. Consulate Attack in Jeddah

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**T**he December 6 terrorist attack on the U.S. consulate in the Saudi port city of Jeddah, which killed five non-American staff members, was a worrisome display of al-Qaeda's careful planning, detailed timing, and audaciousness. Worse still, the assault contradicts Riyadh's claims that it has contained the threat of terrorism. The incident, which comes at a time of persistent high oil prices, has only exacerbated concerns about some of the most senior members of the ruling al-Saud family with regard to their health and ability to govern.

## Security Deficiencies

From a security standpoint, the attack should never have been permitted to unfold. The terrorists, who clearly possessed detailed knowledge of the consulate compound's security procedures and physical layout, jumped out of a car by a side gate just as it opened to allow an embassy vehicle to enter. The guards and Saudi security personnel were taken completely by surprise, and the terrorists were thereby able to gain access to the compound. Wearing military-style uniforms and, by one account, flak jackets, the terrorists showed a high level of military skill as they advanced toward the main consular building. Unable to enter the building itself, they took hostages -- no Americans -- and were overcome a couple of hours later by Saudi security forces.

Although the successful counterattack by Saudi special forces should be praised, concerns nevertheless remain regarding the kingdom's overall security efforts. As in previous terrorist attacks carried out within the past two years, Saudi guards at the consulate were unprepared and did not detect previous terrorist reconnaissance of the compound. Moreover, some security elements, perhaps with al-Qaeda sympathies, may have provided uniforms, equipment, and tactical information to the attackers.

There might also be cause for harsh criticism of U.S. preparedness. Statements in the past month by both Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahri, had called for attacks on U.S. interests, and diplomats in Jeddah had confided anxieties to Westerners living in the city in the days leading up to the consular strike. According to one report, a reception at the consulate scheduled for December 1 had been cancelled on short notice because of security concerns.

Another potential focus for criticism is Prince Nayef, the Saudi interior minister, who is responsible for all police and security forces in the kingdom. As recently as November 11, he reportedly stated that the kingdom was successfully "stripping the terrorists of all means of carrying out criminal acts." Two days earlier, Saudi security forces in Jeddah had killed one suspected terrorist and arrested three others in a shootout. Nayef, who was at a regional conference of security ministers in Tehran at the end of last week, normally visits the sites of local terrorist attacks. The absence of reports regarding any such visit to Jeddah suggests that he has been out of the country (probably on vacation, according to local observers).

Nayef is one of the most powerful men in Saudi Arabia and, despite criticisms of earlier security failings, jealously guards his internal security role. He would not normally be considered a candidate for the throne, partly because of his prickly character, but also because the Saudi succession system is age-driven (he has several older brothers and half-brothers, all sons of Ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia). Yet Nayef is especially influential at the moment because of the continuing ill health of the wheelchair-bound King Fahd (now eighty-three years old) and the fact that Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler, lacks unquestioned authority (e.g., his decisions on issues such as foreign investment in oil and gas exploration are sometimes challenged by other senior members of the royal family).

### Succession Concerns

Speculation about succession has intensified in recent months because of the unannounced but widely known ill health of Defense Minister Prince Sultan, the assumed next-in-line to Crown Prince Abdullah. In summer 2004, Sultan underwent a nineteen-day hospital stay following an operation to remove an intestinal growth. At the time, some officials in both Washington and London thought that he had only a few months to live. Although Sultan still appears in public, diplomats continue to express concern for his health. Their concern is partly attributable to the personal nature of many of the enormous arms deals he has signed with foreign suppliers over the years, particularly with the United States and Britain. Moreover, his early death -- before the passing of either King Fahd or Crown Prince Abdullah -- would dash Western expectations regarding Saudi succession and open the throne to competition among other princes and their sons.

Even if Sultan outlives the king, poor health will likely prevent him from playing his expected role in Saudi succession. When Fahd dies and Abdullah becomes king, the latter will need to appoint a new crown prince. Because Sultan would probably be passed over for this role, Abdullah might choose an interim candidate (appointment as crown prince does not necessarily mean that the other senior princes will comply with the required oath of allegiance in the event of Abdullah's own death). Other sons of Ibn Saud -- such as Local Government Minister Prince Mitab, the once-disgraced Prince Talal, or intelligence chief Prince Nawwaf, all older or the same age as Nayef -- are being mentioned, but without much credibility.

The lack of clarity regarding Saudi succession has added to the kingdom's sense of uncertainty and nearly rudderless leadership. These anxieties would only be compounded if both Abdullah and Sultan -- who are themselves eighty-one and eighty years old, respectively -- died before Fahd passes. Observers have already noted increasing signs of engagement in palace politics by the next generation of princes, some of them in their fifties or sixties and with considerable administrative experience. Prominent figures include Deputy National Guard Commander Mitab bin Abdullah, Assistant Defense Minister Khalid bin Sultan, Ambassador to the United States Bandar bin Sultan, Assistant Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayef, Assistant Local Government Minister Mansour bin Mitab, and Alwaleed bin Talal, an immensely wealthy businessman who holds no official position.

### Multiple Challenges for the United States

Generations of U.S. ambassadors are well aware of the sensitivities of the Saudi royal family with regard to succession. In October 2003, Ambassador Robert Jordan was forced to leave his post in Riyadh prematurely after

remarking at a private dinner party that succession after Abdullah should skip Sultan and Nayef and go to someone in the next generation, such as Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal (who, incidentally, is probably too ill with back trouble and Parkinson's disease to consider such a role.) At the same time, Washington is anxious that municipal elections -- the kingdom's first -- proceed as planned in February 2005, and U.S. policymakers are likely to press Riyadh on this matter. One must also keep in mind the perennial U.S. desire that the kingdom continue its oil policy of maintaining spare production capacity so that current high prices subside. A clear Saudi voice at the upcoming meeting of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) might help in this regard. In light of all these issues, yesterday's terrorist attack in Jeddah was a disturbing reminder that Saudi Arabia's stability and future cooperation with the United States cannot be taken for granted.

Simon Henderson, a London-based associate of The Washington Institute, is author of the Institute monographs [After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia \(templateC04.php?CID=15\)](#) (1995) and [The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy \(templateC04.php?CID=33\)](#) (2003). ❖

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