

# Why Americans Die in Riyadh

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Articles & Testimony

**T**hree Americans murdered in Saudi capital, Riyadh, in just two weeks. Two of them beheaded, gruesomely hacked off with a knife rather than severed with an axe. There can be few surer ways of attracting the attention of the American public. But then the leader of the gang of Islamic terrorists responsible dies in a shoot-out with Saudi security forces, along with three of his henchman. Another 12 suspects are reported arrested. The good guys have won? The crisis is over?

Caution is required in judging events in Saudi Arabia, as "the usual suspects" among the kingdom's American ex-diplomat groupies are commenting in the media. The 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamic militants did not lead to the collapse of the House of Saud. Over the years, the monarchies of neighboring Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Yemen have all been overthrown but the Saudi royal family has not only held on to power, it has established deeper roots.

But there is one particular factor that is different this time. The king and senior princes are all old and increasingly frail. For the last decade they have increasingly bickered over every significant decision. Investment in the oil industry -- delayed. Action on oil prices -- delayed. Support for the U.S. -- delayed, and diminished. Action against al-Qaeda -- denial, then delay.

While thousands of police were searching Riyadh for Paul Johnson last Friday, as the deadline on his fate expired, 81 year-old Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler, was in Red Sea port city of Jeddah for the King Fahd soccer cup final. (The Riyadh team beat the Jeddah team, one-nil.) He was standing in for King Fahd, who has been in declining health since a stroke in 1995.

But if you believe the official Saudi Press Agency, 83 year-old King Fahd spent yesterday at the anniversary celebrations for the consultative assembly, the state-appointed quasi-parliament. He might have been there, in his wheelchair, but he hasn't given a speech in public for years. Reports that "the King stressed", "the Monarch said" are proverbial eyewash. At best, the speech was read for him but, in Saudi eyes, certain fictions must be preserved.

The probable eventual successor to Crown Prince Abdullah, 80 year-old Defense Minister Prince Sultan, is reportedly at his seafront palace in Jeddah, recovering from an 18-day hospital stay in May. The official news agency did not specify his ailment but a newspaper mentioned a stomach polyp. Sultan would probably prefer to be at his

summer palace in Morocco or another of his palaces in the south of France but, even to Saudi royals, this might have given the impression of "fiddling while Rome burns".

I don't know what the Arabic for "procrastination" is but the Saudi royals have a potentially terminal case of it. The only person with his hand on the tiller appears to be Interior Minister Prince Nayef, a comparatively youthful 71 year-old who has been running the kingdom's police and security services since time immemorial (actually 1975). Saudi dissidents, even the non-violent ones, live in fear of him. Ordinary Saudis, even quite senior and undoubtedly loyal officials, avoid crossing him. Nayef's ministry runs a network of street-level informers that would not have disgraced the Stasi. It has also invested billions in controlling Saudi cyberspace -- which makes the al-Qaeda preference for issuing claims and photographs on the internet profoundly risky.

The trouble is that Nayef steers an erratic course. His police are well-equipped but hopelessly inefficient. Their reputation for al-Qaeda sympathisers in their ranks was reinforced by yesterday's (Sunday) claim on an al-Qaeda website that the luckless (and now headless) Johnson was seized at a dummy road-block by al-Qaeda who had borrowed both uniforms and cars from police acquaintances.

Nayef's motives appear to be various: to hold onto the reins of his internal security power; to annoy his half-brother Crown Prince Abdullah; to stop Crown Prince Abdullah ever becoming king, the succession instead going to Nayef's full-brother, Sultan.

All these hypotheses are well-known to close observers of Saudi Arabia. For years Saudi loyalists have acknowledged them, saying, "don't worry", "things will work out", "the princes know that, in the end, they have to stick together." But recently, such people have expressed frustration and the belief that Riyadh palace politics have reached a new level. Now they simply don't know whether things will work out in the end.

Nayef is the leading exponent of trying to use not only stick but also carrot to out-manoeuvre the Islamic opposition to the House of Saud. He hopes to use family and tribal links to shame the militants into surrender. Several months ago, there was one instance when it worked. A father brought his wanted son and surrendered him at the palace residence of Nayef's son, the assistant minister of interior. Yesterday (Sunday), Nayef spent in meetings with tribal elders. They pledged their loyalty to the country and its leadership. He condemned the "deviant" groups.

The Islamic religious establishment is also backing the House of Saud, condemning not only the terrorists but also those who co-operate with them. But this establishment is so tame, it is not clear how much credibility it has on the streets.

The risks for the United States are obvious. Chaos in Saudi Arabia endangers world oil supplies and threatens the world economy. Those who argue that US energy policy should be based on aircraft carriers have a point. But even discreet US suggestions of a way forward are risky as the last US ambassador to Riyadh, Robert Jordan, found to his cost. Musings at a supposedly private dinner party last year, suggesting that succession should jump Sultan and Nayef, led to his quick demise. The newly arrived incumbent, James Oberwetter, is sticking to words of praise for Saudi co-operation, though noting there is much more to do.

The Osama bin Laden preferred prescription "get rid of the lot of them" will not safeguard the world's need for Saudi oil. But until the Saudi leadership works itself out, the future for all of us will be uncertain.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia*. ❖

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