

# The Coming Saudi Showdown

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

Jul 15, 2002

## 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.



## Articles & Testimony

**D**eliberately but without fanfare, Saudi Arabia has altered its relationship with the United States. Quite logically, and dangerously, the House of Saud has decided the proper reaction to the events of September 11 is to distance itself from Washington, seeking instead to firm up its support among the Saudi populace. Once this change is recognized, Saudi behavior of recent months stops seeming bizarre and becomes almost rational. When an unnamed senior Saudi official told the Washington Post in February that U.S. forces in his country had "overstayed their welcome," he was directing his remarks not to the United States but to the Saudi people. The same goes for the statement from possibly the same unnamed official to the New York Times in April threatening cut-offs in oil unless Washington changed its policy toward Israel.

In case the Bush administration failed to notice Riyadh's attempt to put some space into the relationship, the de facto ruler Crown Prince Abdullah played a more obvious card at the end of May. He sent one of his sons, Prince Mitab, to Pakistan to witness the test launch of a Ghauri surface-to-surface missile with a range of 900 miles. Also present at the launch site were North Korean scientists (the Ghauri is a version of their Nodong missile) and a delegation from Libya. Mitab's visit was unannounced, but Crown Prince Abdullah must have known that his son's presence would be noted by American intelligence within days, if not hours.

The Bush Doctrine of "you're either with us or against us" can accommodate perhaps a little nuance. But putting a positive spin on this confab of notables from the "axis of evil," "state supporters of terrorism," and America's "friend" Pakistan would tax the verbal dexterity of anyone delivering the daily intelligence briefing to the president. This is probably why the long-awaited Bush vision for progress in Middle East peace turned out to owe so little to Crown Prince Abdullah's peace plan, revealed earlier this year in the columns of the New York Times. A major question had been whether Saudi Arabia could deliver the endorsement of the Arab world if the United States put pressure on Israel. President Bush always knew the answer was probably "no." He soon concluded that the House of Saud never really intended to put itself on the line.

The new Saudi policy appears to represent a consensus among the leading princes, now that the strongly pro-American 81-year-old King Fahd has gone to Switzerland for what insiders describe as "last-gasp" medical treatment. It appeals anyway to Crown Prince Abdullah's Arab-nationalist instincts. The next in line after Abdullah,

defense minister Prince Sultan, is in no position to argue. He wants to be king.

The policy shift has not stopped a continuing PR campaign in the United States emphasizing Saudi Arabia's "strong support" for the war on terror. Some, however, in the chorus of the kingdom's supporters among oil-types and ex-ambassadors are bright enough to realize that even if the song sheet hasn't changed yet, things are different.

Where will all this lead? One of the more thoughtful people in the British Foreign Office mused last month that Saudi Arabia was changing by "drift rather than revolution," but that the result would be a strict Islamic state as antagonistic to Western interests as Iran. Short of Osama bin Laden, it's the worst outcome possible.

Within a few years, perhaps months, the military facilities in the kingdom will be closed to U.S. and British forces. The Combined Air Operations Center that controls operations over Afghanistan from the Prince Sultan air base is only a temporary structure anyway. The big question is whether the smaller Gulf states, nominally close allies of Saudi Arabia like Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, will fill the void. Happily for the United States, they may well.

But with Saudi Arabia sitting on a quarter of the world's oil reserves and being the largest exporter, the question always comes back to oil. Before the Crawford summit at the end of April, Saudi officials let it be known that the kingdom was prepared to cut off oil supplies for two months unless American policy stopped being so sympathetic to Israel. Panicked but angry, State Department officials persuaded the Saudis to back off.

Given Saudi truculence, anyone preparing contingency plans to secure the Saudi oil fields in times of crisis might want to dust off their work. If Saudi Arabia did cut off oil exports for two months, much of the world might beg the United States to intervene to secure supplies. And with Saudi policy moving in an uncertain direction, it could happen soon. ❖

Weekly Standard

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)