

The Crawford Summit: High Noon for U.S.-Saudi Relations?

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson), [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Apr 24, 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.



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

After declining at least two earlier invitations since January 2001, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is due to meet President George W. Bush for the first time this Thursday. The de facto leader of America's leading oil supplier (his elder half-brother, King Fahd, is ailing) had previously snubbed Washington's efforts, ostensibly angry over the president's reluctance to become involved in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. In addition to the current crisis, the lunchtime talks at President Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, are expected to cover a complete range of issues including the involvement of Saudis in the events of September 11 and extension of the war against terrorism to Saddam Husayn.

The diplomatic portents for the meeting are not auspicious. Last month at the Arab summit in Beirut, Abdullah warmly embraced Saddam Husayn's deputy, Izzat Ibrahim, after a breathtaking compromise in the final communique whereby Baghdad repeated its dubious recognition of Kuwait's sovereignty and backed the Saudi peace plan for the Middle East in return for Arab condemnation of any plans for an attack on Iraq. Moreover, President Bush must have caused consternation in the Saudi camp last week by stating that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was a "man of peace" and that Israel was meeting the timetable for withdrawal from Palestinian areas.

Key to the success of the talks -- or lack of failure -- will be the chemistry between the two men. At seventy-nine years old, Crown Prince Abdullah is from a different generation compared to fifty-five year old Bush, who might not want to be reminded that the Saudis view his father's administration as one of the most supportive and congenial in the fifty-seven-year relationship between the two countries. (The Crown Prince is expected to meet former President George H. W. Bush later in the day.) Culturally, the two leaders share no obvious common ground, and Crown Prince Abdullah's own palatial farms in Saudi Arabia and Morocco are completely different from the simplicity of the

Crawford ranch. In addition, President Bush's hard-nosed, straight-talking style may clash with Crown Prince Abdullah's equally direct manner.

Bogging Down?

Summits are often the time when world leaders sketch their visions for the future, seeking common ground, but there is a danger that the Crawford discussion might get bogged down by the latest twists in the Israel-Palestine issue. Crown Prince Abdullah, an avid watcher of Arab satellite television, is said to be angry at Yasir Arafat's continued encirclement in Ramallah. Abdullah's vision for Middle East peace, initially laid out in a February New York Times interview, requires Israel to withdraw to the June 1967 ceasefire lines and allow Palestinian refugees the right of return, after which the Saudis promise to lead the rest of the Arab world in normalizing relations with Israel. Abdullah's apparent intention was to engage the U.S. administration while offering hope to the people of Israel, assuming they were to elect a more agreeable government than Sharon's.

A widely held view -- created in part by Saudi reluctance to become involved in the minutiae of their peace initiative until Israel withdraws -- is that the peace plan was put forward in part to create positive public relations in the United States, where people are still angry at the heavy involvement of Saudi individuals in the events of September 11. Many in Washington remain concerned that the Saudis have not done enough to dismantle al-Qaeda, despite the direct danger that Osama bin Laden's ideology poses for the Al Saud ruling family. The Saudi preference of paying off rather than confronting threats remains their basic instinct. On a personal level, President Bush is likely to press Crown Prince Abdullah on the issue of Saudi school textbooks which promote hatred rather than tolerance, along with the blatantly racist propaganda in the tightly-controlled Saudi media.

On Iraq, public Saudi support for any U.S. action against Saddam's regime is unlikely. What could be hoped for is that, despite the pan-Arab position achieved at the Beirut summit, Abdullah may acquiesce to U.S. plans, or even signal quiet cooperation on issues like transshipment of U.S. military supplies through Saudi ports en route to Kuwait. Such a signal could be given during a one-on-one part of the summit. Abdullah knows the importance of such moments; when he met President Bill Clinton in Washington, 1998, they were alone for part of their discussions apart from an American-provided translator.

American business executives are hoping that Crown Prince Abdullah's visit may provide the breakthrough in longstanding negotiations concerning the investment of \$25 billion in natural gas, electricity, and water projects. This week, the Wall Street Journal reported these negotiations, which have already missed two deadlines, were stalled again. Although the cause of the impasse is said to be disagreement over the size of the investment return, the talks are at a standstill because of the turmoil in the Middle East, the newspaper stated. Oil has been the presumed underpinning of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, but it is an aspect that still needs attention. In the fourth quarter of last year, the kingdom temporarily slipped from its position as the number one supplier of foreign oil to the United States.

Proclaiming Success

Crown Prince Abdullah is said to be mindful of the significance in being invited to the president's ranch, even though his aversion to helicopters is apparently complicating logistics and reducing the amount of time the two men have for their meeting. Last fall, shortly before September 11, Abdullah was so concerned at what he saw as President Bush's bias toward Israel that he sent a message to the White House, warning that relations between the two countries were "at a crossroads." Yet, the involvement of Saudi dissidents in the September 11 attacks, not to mention the attacks themselves, shook the U.S.-Saudi relationship far more than events between Israelis and Palestinians, reducing the level of trust between Washington and Riyadh.

Moreover, the Saudi leader does not do news conferences; unless his foreign minister and trusted associate, Prince

Saud al-Faisal, takes up the role, the results of the summit may only emerge via briefings from officials. Given the sensitive nature of the issues, these are likely to be carefully scripted and not revelatory.

Perhaps the most likely area of public progress will be on Middle East peace, where President Bush could at least use parts of the Saudi peace plan for promoting further discussions and contacts between the parties. The United States may well push Sharon's idea for an international conference, but that is unlikely to receive a warm welcome from the Saudi side.

Despite its brevity, the Crawford summit is of considerable importance to the health of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, and also vital to the continuing military operations in Afghanistan. Despite the fears that the talks will merely fight brush fires rather than rebuild a strategic approach, both the American and Saudi sides will be hoping to announce it as a success.

Simon Henderson and Patrick Clawson are, respectively, adjunct scholar and director for research at The Washington Institute.

Policy #619

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)