

# Saudi Family Council Suggests Transition Is Imminent

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

The surprise announcement on June 4 of the establishment and first meeting of a Saudi royal family council indicates that the kingdom is preparing itself for a shift in full authority from the ailing King Fahd to his deputy, Crown Prince Abdullah. The change should bring to an end the ambiguity and even confusion that has prevailed since Fahd, who also has the title of prime minister, suffered a stroke in late 1995. The king, said to be in poor physical and mental health, is likely to fly to his palace in southern Spain later this month for an extended stay.

Senior Saudi princes are thought to hold frequent, informal gatherings to sort out disputes within the ruling Al Saud family on how they rule the kingdom. More formal councils have occurred upon the death of previous kings, when the successor has received the baya, the oath of allegiance. Most observers of Saudi Arabia, though, were surprised by the announcement of the new council, especially its eighteen-member composition. Apart from Crown Prince Abdullah as its chairman, and Prince Sultan, his half-brother and presumed eventual successor, as deputy chairman, the other sixteen princes represent almost all of the Al Saud's historical branches. The timing of the establishment of the council might have been accelerated by Fahd's declining health. The king was admitted to the hospital last weekend, although he appeared at the opening of the new session of the consultative council on Monday. He was said to have addressed the council but, in fact, his speech was read for him. Reportedly, Crown Prince Abdullah had intended to go on a long trip to Latin America at the end of May, but these plans seem to have been quietly shelved.

The Al Saud trace their rule back to Muhammed bin Saud, a local sheikh in central Arabia who, in 1745, formed an alliance with a Moslem preacher, Muhammed bin Abdul Wahab. With the former's leadership and fighting prowess and the latter's religious zeal (now known as Wahabism), they expanded the influence of the tribes under them. The modern Saudi state did not appear until 1902 when a descendant, Abdul Aziz, captured Riyadh, now the capital, from a rival tribe. Abdul Aziz, also known as Ibn Saud, ruled until his death in 1953 when the throne passed to Saud, the eldest of his thirty-five surviving sons. Since then, succession has been from half-brother to half-brother—Ibn Saud, although keeping to the Moslem tradition of having only four wives at any one time, had a total of seventeen wives who bore him sons over the course of his lifetime. But this succession line is breaking down. The Al Saud are increasingly old; another son of Ibn Saud (Mishari) died last month, leaving just twenty-four, including Fahd, who was 61 when he became king in 1982. Most sons of Ibn Saud are well into their 60s or 70s.

The official announcement of the new council was vague in detail: The members listened to the "directives" of King Fahd as conveyed by Crown Prince Abdullah, followed by the crown prince's "directives on issues pertaining to the affairs of the family." Later, the council apparently "reviewed the draft of its system and the procedures required for the progress of work within the framework of the royal directives," and "appropriate decisions were taken," the announcement reported.

### Tensions in the Royal Family

Although Crown Prince Abdullah has been the main point of contact for official business between Saudi Arabia and Western countries for many months, the continuing presence of King Fahd has meant that Abdullah's authority has never seemed absolute. Fahd has six full brothers; Abdullah has none, forcing him to make alliances with other parts of the wider royal family said to number at least 6,000 princes. Together, Fahd and his brothers, several of whom hold powerful ministerial positions, are referred to as the Sudairi Seven, after their mother's tribe. By having Sultan, the eldest of their number after Fahd, become crown prince after Abdullah becomes king, they would ensure that their power base is retained.

But there is only one other Sudairi on the new council apart from Sultan: Prince Salman, the governor of the Riyadh province. A surprising omission is Nayef, the minister of interior. Reports suggest he has annoyed Abdullah by continuing to report to the king rather than the crown prince. Perhaps significantly, Nayef said Tuesday that the council would have no political role.

One interpretation of the new council is that it follows the example of other councils established during the last year with a supreme economic council, a supreme petroleum council, and a supreme commission for tourism. But these councils have combined royal leadership with lay technocratic membership and have been described as intending to produce more efficient decision making. There are no commoners on the new family council, and the inclusion of descendants of kings from branches which lost power 170 years ago hardly enables the body to be considered part of a modernizing trend. Another view is that the council will tackle royal issues like fixing guidelines for royal involvement in business and allowing Al Saud princesses to marry commoners.

A Saudi dissident, living in exile in Britain, wrote an article this week describing the new council as the mechanism to dethrone King Fahd and install Crown Prince Abdullah in his place. This seems to be too simplistic: Abdullah is more likely to leave Fahd with the title of king until he dies. But the move is a way of making last-minute arguments with the Sudairis less likely and ensuring that Abdullah will be Fahd's successor.

When Abdullah becomes king, it is his privilege to name the crown prince. There would be strong pressure from some in the family to choose Sultan, believed to be 76 this year. But the wider royal family is said to have doubts about him. A stop-gap candidate is possible: there are many half-brothers available.

### Washington's Quandary

U.S. officials know better than to attempt to meddle in Saudi royal politics, but they must be concerned about any gridlock or instability in Riyadh that could dislocate a whole range of common issues: The Saudis have been giving quiet diplomatic support to the peace process (they helped set up the recent Clinton-Assad summit in Geneva). Washington also wants the kingdom to increase oil production in order to ease recurring pressure on prices. The fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia is in Saudi Arabia's backyard. To the north, there is a greater danger of Saddam Hussein accelerating tension as the U.S. presidential campaign gains tempo.

Washington's hope will be that the new family council represents another step in a smooth, slow transition from the ill King Fahd to his obvious successor Abdullah.

London-based Simon Henderson, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is author of the Institute's 1994

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