

Saudi Succession: The Return of King Fahd

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

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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.



Brief Analysis

King Fahd returned to Saudi Arabia last week after spending more than two months at his palace in southern Spain on what was described as a vacation. Because he is quite old and in poor health, Fahd is no longer the sole top decision maker of the world's largest oil exporter. The interesting question is whether Fahd's presence back in the kingdom will affect the power of Crown Prince Abdullah, who has increasingly been running the kingdom on a day-to-day basis.

Succession in Saudi Arabia

The succession system in Saudi Arabia currently passes the crown from brother to younger brother of the many sons of the founder of the kingdom, Ibn Sa'ud. Uncertainty exists about exact ages, but most Western scholars believe that Fahd is 78 years old this year and so was 61 when he came to the throne in 1982. Crown Prince Abdullah, the heir apparent, is already 76 and; the defense minister, Prince Sultan, is probably 75. Their father and older brothers who were previously kings died in their early seventies. So, even allowing for the benefits of modern medical science, it is widely believed that the current king is unlikely to live much longer and that the next two kings will both have comparatively short reigns.

Apart from the honor of being king, the role also confers great powers of patronage. Therefore, although several older brothers have previously declined the role, strong personalities like Abdullah and Sultan are unlikely to do so. The position also gives a potentially deciding vote in family discussions about future kings and about when, and if, the role should go to a younger generation. Many of these princes—the sons and nephews of the current players—are already in their forties and fifties, and quite a few of them have considerable administrative experience and certainly better formal education.

During 1998 and early 1999, Crown Prince Abdullah had to cope with the strain of declining oil revenues as the price of oil sank to a low of around \$10 a barrel in January 1999. Since then, aided by production cutbacks agreed to by the OPEC cartel (of which the kingdom is the largest producer), the price has soared to around \$24. Maintaining spending restrictions in the face of demands from some senior family members renowned for their profligacy has

been a major challenge for Abdullah. In July, the crown prince established a Higher Economic Council, staffed by well-qualified technocrats, to help guide the kingdom's oil strategy. The recent oil price rise will increase oil revenues, bringing renewed pressures for more spending.

Officially, there is always unity in the Saudi royal family—no local newspaper would dare suggest otherwise—which means that it is never clear what is the real state of affairs. Last week, Prince Talal, a half-brother of both Fahd and Abdullah with a long history of being a family maverick, appeared on television in the neighboring Gulf state of Qatar, publicly calling for more openness and accountability. Pundits interpreted this as support for Abdullah and implied criticism of Sultan and his younger full brothers. Together with Fahd, the latter are known as the "Sudairi Seven," because their mother came from the Sudairi clan. For years, Western observers have speculated about the potential for tension between Abdullah and the Sudairi Seven. The lack of reliable information helps feed such speculation.

It is not clear if the Fahd-Abdullah relationship is like the smooth working partnership that existed in the late 1970s and early 1980s when an ailing Khalid was king and Fahd was his crown prince. Then, Khalid simply left Fahd to run the country. Some observers suggest that Fahd has not given Abdullah that degree of power. Interestingly, Abdullah was not formally named regent during Fahd's stay in Spain, which was his first trip abroad since he had a stroke in late 1995. For six weeks after the stroke, Abdullah was formally the regent before Fahd claimed back the number one position that also includes the title of prime minister. (The king's other formal title is "the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" in Mecca and Medina; when he is out of the country, the crown prince is referred to as the vice custodian).

It is important to note that the poor health of King Fahd is by no means the most serious succession situation faced by modern Saudi Arabia. During the last fifty years, the Al-Sa'ud dynasty has coped successfully with changes ranging from the deposition for incompetence of King Saud in 1964 and the assassination of King Faisal in 1975.

How Other Arab States Manage Succession

Despite the expansion of democracy in many parts of the world, successful transitions this year from father to son in Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf state of Bahrain indicate the system of monarchic rule still works relatively well in the Middle East. To be sure, there can be drama, as was seen in the last-minute change of succession from brother to son by King Hussein of Jordan, but the record suggests there is also stability.

In most Gulf monarchies, succession has not been a major issue, despite some problems with aging rulers. In Kuwait, both the emir and the crown prince (the latter also being the prime minister) are too old or unwell for full-time administrative roles, so the shaykhdom is run by a third member of the al-Sabah family, the foreign minister. Shaykh Zayid bin Sultan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi and the president of the United Arab Emirates, returned last week from several months in the United States and Europe. Zayid is probably older than King Fahd, and although Abu Dhabi has not had a peaceful transition of rule this century, the government appears to run smoothly whether Zayid is in the country or abroad, with responsibilities shared by his senior sons.

The system for succession in the Gulf monarchies looks good by comparison to the succession process in supposedly modern republics like Egypt and Syria, which overthrew their monarchies decades ago. A week ago, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was reelected for a fourth term, although his share of the vote slipped for the first time below the level of 95 percent. But despite Mubarak being himself vice president once, he has steadfastly avoided naming an intended successor. And in Syria, where President Hafiz al-Asad's health is said to be poor, the situation is arguably worse. Asad's apparent preferred candidate is his 36-year-old son, Bashar, but the constitution currently says the president has to be at least 40. In such circumstances, the arbiter of power resorts to being the army.

Simon Henderson, an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute, is author of its study *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia*.



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