

Crown Prince Abdullah's Visit to Washington: An Opportunity to Coordinate U.S. and Saudi Policies

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

Sep 21, 1998

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

The visit to the United States from Wednesday September 23 (the Saudi national day) by Crown Prince Abdullah, the heir apparent of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is part of a rare world tour which has so far taken in Britain and France, and is scheduled to include later China, Japan, South Korea and Pakistan. Officially described as being for "enhancing bilateral relations and exchanging views on international issues", the trip comes at crucial time for U.S.-Saudi relations and could prove an excellent opportunity to co-ordinate policies more closely on Iraq, Iran, the Middle East peace process, Afghanistan, and the exiled Saudi dissident and terrorist, Osama bin Laden. As the kingdom has the largest oil reserves in the world (25 percent of the total) and is also the largest oil exporter, exchanges of views on the state of the world economy could also take up time.

U.S. officials have been trying to orchestrate a visit by Crown Prince Abdullah since the early days of President Clinton's first administration. As the most likely next-in-line to the throne of Saudi Arabia, one of the closest allies of the United States in the Middle East, it has been considered vital to develop better links with him, especially since he has the reputation of being less pro-American than his elder half-brother, King Fahd. Circumstances in the last few years, particularly the king's failing health, have contrived to thwart such a visit until now. Although Abdullah has met President Clinton and other senior members of the administration in Saudi Arabia before, this will be first time discussions will have taken place with them in the United States (It is not his first time in the United States; he made official visits in 1976 and 1987).

> The prince is 75 years old this year but is still fit and well, especially in comparison with King Fahd, 77 this year, who suffered a minor stroke two years ago and was hospitalized for two weeks last month for treatment of recurring gall bladder problems. Abdullah has served loyally in the number two position since 1982 and has also gained considerable administrative experience by being first deputy prime minister to Fahd since then. His main power base though is a commander of the National Guard, a role he has had since 1963. The guard is an independent force, nearly 60,000 strong, equipped with armored vehicles and artillery. It is charged with protecting the royal family as well as guarding the kingdom's oil and gas installations. Trained by the United States and with detachments of advisory officers from both the United States and Britain, the guard often comes out well in comparisons made with

the much larger Saudi army.

Although Fahd remains king, Abdullah runs the kingdom on a day-to-day basis. Apart from ill-health, Fahd is also said to suffer from an inability to concentrate, making his grasp of his residual administrative responsibilities tenuous. But it seems certain that Fahd will retain the title of king until he dies. Saudis respect age in their rulers, and it would not be in style for Abdullah to want to appear to be edging out Fahd. Indeed, although the king has allowed Abdullah to make his trip, Fahd seems determined to maintain the impression of still being the supreme authority, chairing the regular weekly meeting of the council of ministers the day after Abdullah left the kingdom.

> But Abdullah has already managed to make his mark on the kingdom's foreign affairs, where he has orchestrated a rapprochement across the Persian Gulf with Iran, and on its financial affairs, where he has instituted a tough program of cutbacks made necessary by the 40 percent fall in the price of oil in the last year. It is notable that he is accompanied by the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, and the finance minister, Ibrahim al-Assaf (Two other important members of his entourage are two of his sons: Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, the deputy commander of the national guard and Prince Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, who runs his father's office).

In policy discussions with the United States there is likely to be much common ground but also room for some differences. Abdullah is a devout Moslem and very conscious of his Arab identity. One of his wives is related to Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad and unlike many in the Saudi royal family, he vacations in the Arab world rather than in the West. In London last week he said "We are an indivisible part of the Arab world, and our major problem is that of Palestine and Jerusalem," and "if Israel goes ahead in its intransigent policy, then in the long run the Arabs will triumph." Before the establishment of the state of Israel, the then Saudi king (Abdullah's father) argued against Jewish refugees being allowed to go there, and later King Faisal (Abdullah's elder brother) blamed communism on Jews and imposed an oil embargo on the West at the time of the 1973 Yom Kippur war. But even though it is hard to imagine that Saudi Arabia would ever establish relations with Israel, the kingdom plays a role in the peace process, attending the 1991 Madrid conference and providing help for the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, including often lending him an executive jet for his travels. In London last week, the official Saudi press agency, quoted Abdullah as saying the "realization of a comprehensive and just peace will serve the interests not only of the Arabs, but also of Israel." In both London and Paris, Abdullah called for a greater European role in the peace process and is expected in Washington to urge the United States to pressure Israel.

> On Iraq, there will be a greater coincidence of views, even though when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, Abdullah is believed to have initially argued against allowing large scale deployments of U.S. troops to the kingdom. The Saudi crown prince thinks international sanctions should not be lifted as long as Saddam Hussein poses a threat to the region. In London, Abdullah said, "Unfortunately the Iraqi president does not appear to learn from his mistakes. He continues to be a source of instability in the area." However, Abdullah is thought to concern himself with how to prevent the permanent presence of U.S. troops in the kingdom.

On Iran, Abdullah's perspective is believed to be that the election of the moderate President Khatemi last year made it necessary to downplay investigation of any Iranian involvement in the earlier bombings of U.S. targets in Riyadh and al-Khobar. Abdullah developed a good rapport with Khatemi when attending the Islamic summit in Tehran last December. He now describes relations with Iran as very promising. Though he has a simple piety, those who know Abdullah say that he is very moderate in religious terms, having no time for fundamentalist doctrines and despising terrorist groups operating under the label of Islam. In London, he said, "Terrorism is a disease with no particular religion or nationality. It is a great error to link terrorism with Islam simply because some people involved in terrorism raise slogans they believe to be Islamic." He was contemptuous of Osama bin Laden, saying he had "neither money nor influence in Saudi Arabia." The U.S. side is likely to press Saudi Arabia to use its influence on the Taliban in Afghanistan who, like Saudis, are part of the Wahabi sect of Islam.

> Apart from U.S. officials, Abdullah is also likely to meet representatives of U.S. oil companies and defense suppliers. Relations built up over years of high energy prices and lucrative military contracts are now changing. Abdullah will have little to offer them materially. His economic policies are based on the need to maintain domestic economic and social stability. In Britain, where British Aerospace has just reported a \$750 million delay in Saudi payments for military aircraft, he said "there are no new military deals now under consideration." He also said, "The period of the boom, as everybody knows, is over."

(If President Clinton is fearing Abdullah's visit will force another opportunity for reporters to ask him questions about Monica Lewinsky, he need not worry. Abdullah, who as a Moslem has four wives, did not meet the press directly in London; the embassy released his answers to written questions two days after he departed.)

Simon Henderson is a journalist with the Financial Times in London and editor of its specialist newsletter, FT Middle East Energy. While a 1993 visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, he wrote the Policy Paper After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia.

Policy #340

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

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

TOPICS

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

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

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

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