

PolicyWatch #1552 : Special Forum Report

## Who Will Be the Next King of Saudi Arabia... And Does It Matter?

Featuring Robert Jordan and [Simon Henderson](#)

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*On July 13, 2009, Ambassador Robert Jordan and Simon Henderson addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss succession in Saudi Arabia and the challenges it could pose for the United States. Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the [Gulf and Energy Policy Program](#) at The Washington Institute. His most recent Policy Focus, *After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia*, will be released this month. Robert Jordan is a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, where he was posted shortly after the September 11 terror attacks.*

### Simon Henderson

Saudi Arabia's next succession will likely be crucial to U.S. regional policy, since the character and ruling style of the next Saudi monarch will deeply affect American interests on a wide range of important regional issues, including Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Middle East peace process, and of course, energy. Debate about Saudi Arabia's future leadership has intensified since March, when Interior Minister Nayef was appointed second deputy prime minister, a position perceived as the "crown prince-in-waiting." Because of the ill health of Crown Prince Sultan, the recent appointment confirms Nayef as the most likely candidate for next crown prince or perhaps even king.

As outlined in the 1994 study, [After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia](#), the principal criterion for a Saudi king is age. Whether Ibn Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, ever himself deemed seniority a requirement is questionable, but the chronology of his sons' births does seem to remain the preeminent arbiter. Ibn Saud has also reportedly stated that no future king should be the child of a foreigner. Of his twenty-two wives, only about half were of Arab descent. Furthermore, a Saudi king usually possesses experience, acumen, interest in politics, and popularity -- characteristics lacking in several of Ibn Saud's sons.

With King Abdullah at eighty-six this year -- and already older than any of his predecessors -- several possibilities emerge.

The most likely scenario is that the eighty-five-year-old Sultan will pass away before Abdullah, putting tremendous pressure on the king to appoint Nayef as crown prince. This new partnership may not last long, however, since Nayef himself is reportedly in ill health.

If Abdullah predeceases Sultan, the crown prince, despite his ill health, would probably claim the throne and appoint Nayef as number two. The newly formed and untested Allegiance Council, however, would have to approve both Sultan's fitness and his selection of Nayef as crown prince. The council, perceived as Abdullah's device to block the advancement of the so-called Sudairi princes -- the largest and most powerful subgroup of Ibn Saud's sons, which includes Sultan and Nayef -- would probably avoid any confrontation and quietly acquiesce.

If both Abdullah and Sultan are deemed unable to perform official duties, the Allegiance Council, after appointing an ad hoc council to govern the country for seven days, would choose a suitable candidate to be

king. In this scenario, Nayef would probably claim the throne. His command of numerous internal security forces raises the possibility that if there were wide royal opposition to his claim, he could effectively carry out a coup d'etat.

Another scenario might involve a compromise king. This would likely be the respected seventy-three-year-old governor of Riyadh province, Prince Salman, who as a Sudairi might convince Nayef to step aside in the name of al-Saud harmony.

Whoever becomes the next leader of Saudi Arabia will face unique and trying challenges. The chaos plaguing Iran today poses a number of complications for the kingdom. The Saudi leadership is nervous about the recent events, worried by the possibility of revolutionary change as well as the consolidation of power under Iranian hardliners.

U.S.-Saudi relations would face serious obstacles under Nayef, a difficult man to work with and reputedly close to conservative clerics. Also, he has spoken out against democratic elections, since he views the direct appointment of officials as a safer option. In addition, Nayef would likely reverse some of Abdullah's reform measures, and it is already apparent since Nayef's recent appointment that the king's reform agenda has lost momentum.

### **Robert Jordan**

Understanding how Saudi succession affects U.S. regional policies is critical, particularly because U.S.-Saudi relations are improving after years of tension following the September 11 attacks. After the 2003 bombings in Riyadh, the ambassador ordered the departure from Saudi Arabia of all but the most essential U.S. foreign service officers and their dependants, a move that convinced many U.S. businesses to diminish their presence in the kingdom. Saudi leaders were upset with this order, concluding that the United States did not consider Saudi Arabia adequately secure.

In response, Saudi officials, led by Nayef, have taken down a number of terrorist cells in the last few years, ones that the kingdom did not even admit the existence of in 2001. These achievements have proven that Nayef is capable of being in charge of the country's security.

Despite U.S. concerns over Saudi succession, the next Saudi king -- whoever he is -- will likely maintain the country's current positions on many issues, notwithstanding past public statements. Before becoming king, Abdullah was thought to be completely against the U.S. invasion of Iraq; this, however, was not the case. Riyadh provided essential support to the United States during the war and proved that "necessity does lead to some accommodations from time to time." As politically experienced individuals move to the foreground, Saudi Arabia is likely to be fairly stable regardless of the line of succession.

In light of the situation in Iran, however, Saudi Arabia may be forced to accept certain changes, or at the very least, come to certain realizations. The kingdom's leaders are aware that losing touch with religion could affect popular support for the monarchy. A revolutionary movement or the strengthening of Iranian hardliners would likely make the Saudis very nervous. But whatever transpires in Iran, Saudi Arabia's new leadership will attempt to balance its own power in the Middle East.

Going forward, although Saudi Arabia will likely continue to view the United States as a key foreign ally, the next Saudi leadership will probably prioritize strengthening diplomatic ties with other world actors instead of investing solely in its relationship with the United States.

President Barack Obama made the right choice in traveling to Saudi Arabia before his recent speech in Cairo. Because business in the Middle East is often conducted on a personal basis, Obama's cultivation of personal ties with the Saudi leadership will gain him trust and could further strategic achievements.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Stephanie Papa.*

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