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Saudi Royals Reunited? Crown Prince Sultan Returns Home

By [Simon Henderson](#)

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Late on December 11, Crown Prince Sultan arrived home to Saudi Arabia after a year's absence that included medical treatment in the United States and a nine-month convalescence at his palace in Morocco. Although described as "enjoying full health" and looking animated, Sultan is believed to still be unwell. In Sultan's absence, King Abdullah named interior minister Prince Nayef to the vacant post of second deputy prime minister, a position construed as crown-prince-in-waiting. Apart from marking a fresh twist in a drawn-out succession process, Sultan's return has implications for Saudi domestic and foreign policy -- particularly, on the eve of a Gulf summit, the continuing tension on the border with Yemen and a potentially nuclear Iran.

Struggle within the House of Saud

Sultan's return changes calculations on the political dynamics of the Saudi royal family, the House of Saud. Sultan is one of the so-called Sudairi princes, the largest and most powerful group of full brothers among the twenty surviving sons of Ibn Saud, the founder of the modern kingdom. Many of King Abdullah's policy innovations since 2005, when he assumed the throne upon the death of King Fahd (another Sudairi), have been interpreted as attempts to outflank the Sudairis by spreading power to other parts of the royal family. Despite these efforts, his March appointment of Nayef (also a Sudairi) suggests the limits of Abdullah's powers as well as a fight back by the Sudairi brothers, who also include Riyadh governor Prince Salman and the vice ministers of defense and interior.

Succession is a growing issue because King Abdullah, now eighty-six, is the oldest-ever surviving Saudi monarch. Although apparently in good health himself, the state of Abdullah's half brothers (he has no full brothers) is of increasing concern: five are in their eighties; most are in their seventies. Last month, eighty-one-year-old Prince Mitab resigned without explanation as minister of local government, suggesting ill health. Prince Mishal, eighty-three and head of the Allegiance Council notionally charged with selecting a future crown prince, has just returned home from unspecified medical treatment in Beirut.

The criteria for choosing a new king are unclear, but include seniority, experience, and confidence by the family that the governance of the world's largest oil exporter and custodian of Islam's most holy places will be in the safest hands. Claims of Sultan's good health bolster his status as crown prince, but his advanced age, suggesting frailty and infirmity, might jeopardize his chances. Sultan's exact age is disputed: most scholars say that he was born in 1924, and thus eighty-five. When his full brother King Fahd died in 2005, the government-owned Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported that Sultan was born in 1930, although yesterday it reported his birthdate as January 1931, making him seventy-eight and younger than several of his ailing half-brothers. Public debate over the question of any incipient ill health does not arise in a pliant media: Sultan was said to have had colon cancer in 2003, but a foreign correspondent who later reported continuing concerns about it was forced to leave the country.

Domestic Challenges

Although on December 5 Saudi oil minister Ali Naimi described the approximately \$75-per-barrel price of oil

as "perfect," the kingdom is experiencing new and unusually public criticism of how it is spending the revenues. The Red Sea port of Jeddah is a case in point. The city suffered catastrophic floods on November 25, brought about by torrential rain after a period of drought. (The government had called on the Saudi people to pray for rain.) At least 118 people died, although some estimates put the toll at several times this, with one claiming more than a thousand. Critics see the magnitude of the catastrophe as correlating directly to insufficient investment in public works.

Among the places badly damaged were parts of the new, state-of-the-art King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, a pet project of the monarch. In Jeddah itself, the crisis was worsened by lack of drains, even on newly built roads. The sewage system in much of the city is antiquated, relying on basement tanks that are emptied regularly and the contents trucked to Musk Lake (labeled on GoogleEarth), an artificial lake in the hills several miles east of the city. Fears that the earth walls of the lake could collapse have led to the panicked flight of some residents in the likely path of the estimated 30 million cubic meters of mostly untreated sewage. On December 10, it was reported that the Jeddah municipality has banned further dumping into the lake.

Regional Challenges

Riyadh is also disturbed by continuing tension on the border with Yemen, where Saudi military forces have been engaged against Houthi rebels said to have crossed into Saudi territory. The problem is complicated by Saudi and Yemeni claims of Iranian support of the Houthi forces, lending to the struggle the dimension of a proxy war. Despite claims of successes, the fighting has not been going entirely well for the Saudi forces. At least one small group of special forces has been wiped out by rebel units, and Saudi officials have released the names of nine missing soldiers, including a lieutenant colonel. Online reports indicate that some of the missing have been found in Yemeni territory, a contentious issue because King Abdullah has said no soldiers will cross the border.

As defense minister since 1962, Sultan likely is particularly concerned about the Yemeni tension; his son Prince Khalid, the assistant minister of defense, has taken a lead role in the current crisis. Observers have noted that when King Abdullah convened the supreme economic council last month, the roles of chairman and vice chairman, previously held by Abdullah and Sultan, were transferred to foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal (a close ally of Abdullah) and Nayef's son, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, rather than to a son of Sultan.

Gulf Summit

Sultan is returning on the eve of the annual summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), held this year in Kuwait. The GCC embraces Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, with Riyadh tending to take the dominant role. Originally established as a diplomatic bloc to counter the regional influence of revolutionary Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, it is now principally concerned with the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear capability. A GCC struggle expected on December 15, however, is unlikely to mention this issue so bluntly; it will be interesting to note how it does word its apprehensions, as well as its ritual condemnation of Iran's persisting occupation of three small Gulf islands claimed by the UAE.

U.S. Policy

The kingdom's greatest concerns -- confided privately to U.S. officials -- are that Iran will develop a nuclear weapon and that either the U.S. or Israel, or both, will take military action against Iran. So far, Riyadh has failed to square this circle: President Obama's June visit showed that the kingdom's fear of Iran has not been matched by any willingness to make minor concessions to Israel that might, in effect, unite the Arab world and Israel to meet the challenge of Iran.

Both the transfer of power within Saudi Arabia and the kingdom's place as regional leader are crucial issues for Washington. Saudi Arabia must also tackle the threat of instability seeping across the border from Yemen,

as well as the danger posed by Islamic radicalism and the attraction it may pose for Saudi youth. Rivalry over succession in Saudi Arabia is not new, but the return of Sultan is likely to accentuate it. Washington can do little to affect the House of Saud's internal discussions, but the Obama administration must nonetheless make Riyadh aware that it will be watching the outcomes carefully.

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