

## **The Saudi Royal Family: What Is Going On?**

**By Simon Henderson**

The U.S.-Saudi relationship has historically been a very personal one. The Saudis are fond of recalling the 1945 meeting between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz (Ibn Saud) on board of the USS Quincy in the Suez Canal. Indeed, for some years, whenever the ailing King Fahd has met official American visitors, the Saudi translator into English has recalled this meeting whatever the king may or may not have actually mumbled.

The personal nature of the relationship has been emphasized in recent years by the open access under successive US presidents to the White House held by the long-serving Saudi ambassador in Washington DC, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, a nephew of King Fahd.

Yet the relationship is souring rapidly and this is not just a reflection of the aftermath of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, although these events were important. The reasons are complicated and can be confusing, particularly because apologists for Saudi Arabia regularly note the supposed efforts of the Saudi royal family to normalise relations – and blame any real or apparent difficulty on detractors of the kingdom.

This smokescreen cannot hide the scope of the problem. Just one example is the tale of the Saudi embassy bank accounts in Washington DC. Riggs Bank has recently been fined \$25 million for violating money-laundering laws in connection with these accounts. (The fine also referred to apparently separate concerns about the accounts of the embassy of Equatorial Guinea, an association that might have further reduced the standing of the Saudi embassy for many.) Indeed, in the absence of Riggs wanting to manage the accounts, there is now the implication that Prince Bandar has difficulty cashing a check in this town (Washington).

What is going on? How much does the current state of affairs relate to internal (and therefore usually obscure and difficult to comprehend) problems in Saudi Arabia? How much does it relate to external events, those in the wider world? And how much is it a reflection of the state of the royal family, increasingly an aged and often apparently dysfunctional grouping?

This study concentrates on this third theme, the Saudi royal family, but also tries to set it in a wider domestic and international context.

The Saudi royal family is larger, richer and domestically more dominant than any other royal family in the world, now and at any other time in history. Estimates of the numbers of the family vary but there are said to be over 5,000 princes. Total “royals” including princesses and those who have married into non-royal families, could be over 25,000. It might even be double this. There are no figures. But of this uncertain total there are probably only 100 or so key players domestically. Internationally, the number is much less. The main players are just a handful:

King Fahd: Age 83 this year. Has had several strokes since 1995 and is reportedly in poor health.

Crown Prince Abdullah: Age 81. Fahd’s designated successor and de facto ruler but only held the authority of regent for a few months in early 1996.

Prince Sultan: Age 80. Defense Minister and the assumed successor to Abdullah, if and when he becomes king. Reportedly in poor health and recently hospitalized for undisclosed reasons.

Prince Nayef: Age 71. Interior Minister.

Prince Salman: Age 68. Governor of Riyadh Province. Reportedly in poor health.

Prince Saud al-Faisal: Age 63. Foreign Minister. Reportedly in poor health.

Prince Bandar. Age 61. Ambassador to the U.S. since 1983.

As the list indicates, the senior members of the Saudi royal family are increasingly old and some are in ill-health. There are also various reportedly rivalries. If not actually breaking down, the Saudi system of ruling is certainly under strain. This problem is occurring at a particularly bad moment, a situation that has been developing at least since Saddam

Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 as the Saudi royal family faces twin internal challenges.

Conservative Muslim clergy have worried about loss of influence and arrival of, at least in Saudi terms, modernism. Liberals have chafed at restrictions while watching changes in other parts of the world, including in the kingdom's Arab Gulf neighbours. Who is winning? As always in trying to follow events in the kingdom, the information is often fragmentary and occasionally contradictory. But what has been going on in the kingdom has contributed to instability in the country. And, because of Saudi Arabia's leadership role in both the Islamic world and the international oil market, events in Saudi Arabia will, for better or worse, have an impact across the world.

As if pressures within the kingdom were not challenging enough, the Saudi government also faces pressure from the United States, particularly since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, to reform. Even before that tragic day, Washington was squeezing the Saudi royal family to allow reform, at least in the sense of the gradual widening of political power. After that date, Washington quickly came to the conclusion that lack of political change in Saudi Arabia had contributed to the sense of powerlessness and frustration of those attracted by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda organisation.

There is a prevailing view of what is going on in Saudi Arabia. The view is that Crown Prince Abdullah is a reformer, wanting to modernize the country economically and liberalize it politically. The economic reform tackles the issue of unemployment and reducing the heavy dependence of the kingdom on oil revenues. The political reform makes better use of the talent of the Saudi people, stretching to include a role for women in the work force.

There is also a prevailing view of the struggle in the royal family. Crown Prince Abdullah is the good guy while the other Sudairis – the full-brothers of King Fahd – are opposing him because they don't want political reform and they fear that economic reform will reduce their wealth.

A middle approach is arguably just as valid. It is possible to conclude that the House of Saud's principle concern is merely to survive. This less visionary and safer choice is partly forced on them because of the uncertain nature of overall leadership that does not look like

being resolved for several years at least. To survive, it is more likely that the House of Saud will side with the conservatives rather than the liberals, because the former are stronger and more significant than the latter.

In order to survive, the Saudi government (the term is largely synonymous with the “House of Saud”, the Saudi royal family) will say whatever is necessary. At various times, Saudi officials either argue that events in Saudi Arabia are part of a slow but steady continuum of progress or nothing is in fact changing. Whatever the truth, the basic power structure of the kingdom certainly remains the same. This analysis will look at events over the last 15 years as well as the three traditionally-acknowledged power centres: the House of Saud, the religious establishment and the technocratic/commercial middle class.

A British ambassador to Saudi Arabia once said that he found a useful tool for analysing events was to consider the three traditional power centres as the three corners of triangle, with the House of Saud at the apex. The House of Saud needed the other power centres. The clerical establishment provided legitimacy and the middle class provided the technical and administrative skills. But both were rivals and constantly sought to increase their influence with the House of Saud at the expense of the other. This put this “triangle of power” into a permanent state of tension.

A Saudi official offered an alternative scheme. Staying with the triangle format he assigned the power centres to the sides rather than the corners, and he made the base of the triangle very small. The House of Saud and the clerical establishment were assigned each of the two steep sides while the technocratic/commercial middle class took the base. His view was that the House of Saud and the clerical establishment were, in terms of raw power, evenly matched and rivals to each other. The middle class was important but far less powerful. From its position at the narrow base the middle-class jumped from one side to another, depending on which side it thought it could reap temporary advantage.

These are not views that are reflected in the usual public analyses of the Saudi power structure. This is because the Saudi government only wants to represent itself as the sole, legitimate and uncontested leader of the country. With its control over the local media and its powerful influence over the regional media, most of the time the Saudi government view dominates, reinforcing its own view and downplaying challenges and contradictions.

To the clerical establishment, the Saudi government tries to appear conservative, representing itself as preserving stability and allowing the Wahhabi Islamic orthodoxy to remain. To the more liberal end of society – as well as to western governments – the House of Saud depicts itself as modern, saving the kingdom from a stifling and debilitating conservatism. Over the years, the Saudi government has developed a technique for obscuring the contradictions into an art form, a skill that has persisted even after the terror attacks on the U.S. of September 11, 2001.

A good example of the static nature of Saudi change is the Basic Law promulgated on March 1, 1992. In one sense it was a major advance: it identified “the nature of the state, its goals and responsibilities, as well as the relationship between the ruler and citizens.” It 83 articles in nine chapters: General Principles, System of Government, Constituents of Saudi Society, Economic Principles, Duties and Rights, State’s Authorities, Financial Affairs, Control Authorities, General Rulings. But, apart codifying what had previously not been written down, it also generally did not say anything different to what people had assumed to be the case.

Even so, change or no real change, the 1992 Basic Law will perhaps be looked upon as King Fahd’s major contribution to the system of government in Saudi Arabia. Other contributions were the 1992 establishment of the majlis e-shoura or consultative council, the diplomatic efforts to resolve border disputes with Saudi Arabia’s neighbours, and the 1990 decision to invite US troops into the kingdom to protect it after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. But for each of these other examples, an argument can also be made that they were not new or not a change from the traditional way of doing things. Indeed, domestically, such decisions have to be argued in terms of tradition in order to win political support.

Why did King Fahd introduce the Basic Law? A principal reason must have been to give more bureaucratic shape to the kingdom. (A similar explanation is King Fahd’s efforts at a series of regional summits in the early 1990s to resolve lingering border disputes.) But by 1992 he would also have been responding to the pressure on him by both liberals and conservatives that erupted after Saddam Hussein’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait caused him to invite US troops into the kingdom. In this sense, the Basic Law can be seen as acting as a further foundation for the House of Saud in the opening debate. The shock of 1990 invasion

of Kuwait, with its consequent direct threat to the kingdom, challenged Saudis to judge whether the kingdom had to change to survive or reinforce its basic principles. It is political debate that is continuing until today.

This is a brief chronology of events:

1990: Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and arrival of US and other non-Muslim forces to defend the kingdom after the Council of Senior Ulama issue a fatwa permitting the move. King Fahd announces plans to initiate political reforms, including the creation of a consultative council, majlis a-shoura. Group of Saudi liberals propose 10 reforms. Group of women attempt to drive cars in Jeddah.

1991: "Letter of Demands" from radical ulama with support of some senior ulama attempts to counter marginalisation of the ulama.

1992: King Fahd announces Basic System of Government, emphasising the duties and responsibilities of the ruler. Also proposes consultative council.

1993: Consultative council inaugurated.

1994: Osama bin Laden stripped of his Saudi nationality.

1995: King Fahd has first of several strokes.

1996: After six weeks as regent, Crown Prince Abdullah nominally makes way again for King Fahd to rule.

1997: Number of members of consultative council increased from 60 to 90.

1999: Saudi women attend session of consultative council.

2001: September 11 attacks on US; 15 out of 19 hijackers are Saudi. Consultative council expanded to 120 members.

2003: US-led forces overthrow Saddam Hussein. US withdraws remaining forces from Saudi Arabia. More than 300 Saudi intellectuals, including women, sign petition calling for reforms. Crown Prince Abdullah establishes national dialogue on reform. Protest demonstrations in Riyadh and other cities. Government announces elections for 14 municipal councils within a year. Suggestion that there will be elections to consultative council within three years. Consultative council given powers to initiate legislation.

2004: Saudi businesswoman speaks to economic conference in Jeddah, allowing her headscarf to slip. The Grand Mufti condemns the incident and warns of grave consequences. Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal rejects external pressure for political reforms. Defence Minister Prince Sultan rejects the idea of elections for the consultative council. Interior Minister Prince Nayef orders arrest of 13 leading liberals and academics who had petitioned the government for reforms.

The chronology is necessarily selective but three distinct themes emerge: external events, internal rivalry in the royal family and the state of health of the King Fahd, and internal rivalry between conservative clerics and more modern personalities in Saudi society.

Looking in turn at these three main themes of events in Saudi Arabia in the last 15 years:

### **External events**

The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait followed on quickly from the turmoil of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war and the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Saudi Arabia found itself powerless to intervene diplomatically in these events and was also defenceless militarily. In order to protect itself it had to develop its friendship with the United States. It did this by ensuring that the U.S. would protect it and built up the relationship by extensive purchases of US weapons.

The value of the alliance with the U.S. was proved at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait but its cost also emerged. The unreadiness and inability of Saudi military forces to ensure an adequate defence was obvious despite the billions of dollars spent. Conservative Islamic voices in the kingdom were able to criticise both the extravagance and ineptitude of the Saudi government as well as the kingdom's reliance on the non-Muslim world to defend it. Osama

bin Laden made his offer to the House of Saud to raise an Islamic army to defend the kingdom, an offer that was rejected in favour of US support.

Later, the involvement of Saudi citizens and the leadership role of Osama bin Laden in the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, antagonised relations with the U.S. and strengthened anti-American sympathies within the Saudi population. Subsequent military operations in Afghanistan exacerbated the tensions as the Saudi government had to juggle its ties with the U.S. while coping for increasing anti-American feeling at home.

The U.S. decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein antagonized both Arab and Islamic sentiment within Saudi Arabia, as well as other Arab countries. Official co-operation with the U.S. was publicly withheld, although discreet military co-operation was allowed. The subsequent role of the U.S. in post-Saddam Iraq has been antipathetic to Saudi concerns. Neither the Saudi government nor the Saudi people are happy with the emergence of a Shia Muslim-dominated state on their border. The American concern for the introduction of democratic values has concerned the Saudi government.

### **Internal rivalry in the royal family and the state of health of King Fahd**

The conventional wisdom among western commentators is that Crown Prince Abdullah is blessed with particular awareness that unless there are economic reforms in the kingdom, there will be increased socio-political problems. His principal rivals to the throne, Prince Sultan and Prince Nayef, are blind to these dangers and are recklessly opposing him on all policy initiatives. Meanwhile, the latter are keeping King Fahd, their full-brother, alive so that Crown Prince Abdullah will never be able to succeed him and gain the greater power that the title of monarch bestows.

One interpretation of this tension was explained in the January/February 2004 edition of *Foreign Affairs* in the article “The Saudi Paradox” by Michael Scott Doran. He argued that “Abdullah tilts towards the liberal reformers and seeks a rapprochement with the United States, whereas Nayef sides with the clerics and takes direction from an anti-American religious establishment that shares many goals with al-Qaeda.”

This analysis is arguably simplistic as well as probably wrong. Until recently, Prince Nayef’s reputation as anti-American obscurantist had been reinforced by his interview with a Kuwaiti

magazine a few months after 9/11 in which he blamed the attacks on “the Zionists”. But last month, after the May 1 terrorist attack on western expatriates working at a petrochemical plant in the Saudi Red Sea port of Yanbu, Crown Prince Abdullah also blamed “the Zionists”, saying he was almost certain they were responsible. Apart from acting as yet another nail in the coffin of his 2002 Middle East peace plan, Crown Prince Abdullah’s repetition of the slur illustrates neatly Saudi thinking. By Saudi logic, Israel benefits from chaos in the Arab world, so any chaos might be caused by Israel. In Saudi terms, the slur also seeks to delegitimise the Islamic militants who carried out the act in the minds of the broader Saudi population.

This example is yet another indication that, in present-day Saudi Arabia, there is a system of government based on tribal traditions that is incapable of running a modern state. The conservative caution of much of the population is stronger than any wish to modernize. The rivalry in the royal family is about personal power and antipathy rather than policy differences. To survive, the regime must deal ruthlessly or co-opt their more extremist conservative opponents. This will be done at the cost of good relations with the West in general and the United States in particular. Liberals will be further marginalized. Saudi oil policy will be less friendly to the rest of the world by encouraging high international oil prices despite the burden this places on the world economy.

That there is rivalry in the House of Saud is unquestionable. The fault lines are apparent to all observers: King Fahd is supported by his full brothers, who together make up the Sudairi Seven; Crown Prince Abdullah lacks any full-brothers. The reasons for rivalry are more difficult to be certain of, but lust for power seems more important than policy differences.

The current Saudi system of succession (of passing from brother to brother among the sons of King Abdul Aziz) can be argued to be coming to the end of its useful life. King Fahd is 83 years old this year (2004), while the next two in line, Crown Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan are respectively 81 and 80. Unless succession skips to a much younger brother or drops a generation, the next kings of Saudi Arabia will only rule for a very few years and will be of an age when their abilities and energy will be questionable.

While King Fahd remains alive, although the size of the problem increases, its impact is postponed. So it is hard not to accept the argument that King Fahd is being kept alive so that

Crown Prince Abdullah might pre-decease him. This would ensure that the succession would open up for either Sultan or his younger Sudairi full-brothers, Nayef and Salman. It also ensures that Crown Prince Abdullah's children do not become contenders for a succession that skips a generation.

Meanwhile King Fahd is merely a figurehead. Since his 1995 stroke, he has reportedly had several further strokes. Although he appears in public, he sits in a wheel-chair – an arrangement that is less and less disguised. Those who have met him report that his comments, in so far as they are comprehensible, are, at best, detached from reality. Although he is quoted as making public statements, he has not been heard actually to utter them for several years. Such statements are assumed to be wholly the work of his aides.

Despite these tensions, the House of Saud tries to exhibit an aura of unity. Policy disagreements are difficult to spot. One case though was the attempt to interest foreign oil companies in investment in oil exploration, a policy that became known as the Crown Prince's Initiative, because Crown Prince Abdullah was its main proponent. The policy, with putative contracts estimated at \$20bn, was based on the need to bring in foreign investment to find and exploit natural gas reserves that could then be used for electricity generation, desalination as well as the production of petrochemicals. Crown Prince Abdullah was persuaded that the kingdom itself could not find the investment and the projects were vital to ensure that the Saudi people did not become disgruntled because of poor water and power supplies as well as lack of employment opportunities.

The policy challenged the notion of Saudi sovereignty over its oil and gas reserves. To the surprise of outsiders, the oil minister, Ali al-Naimi, was allowed to criticise publicly the proposals. The apparent insubordination was tolerated because senior members of the royal family were in a quandary about the issue. The identities of these princes were never clear but they would have needed the real or apparent support of King Fahd. The result was the decision was endlessly delayed while, in parallel, oil prices recovered from their low levels and, post 9/11, relations with the U.S. deteriorated. (US oil companies had originally been assumed to be the principal beneficiaries of the deals as a way of better guaranteeing US diplomatic and military support for the kingdom.) When contracts eventually began to be signed in November 2003, they were with non-US companies (Royal Dutch/Shell and TotalFinaElf) and on terms much less attractive than originally considered likely. But despite

the reports of differences, Crown Prince Abdullah made no public indication of any annoyance.

### **Internal rivalry between conservative clerics and more modern personalities**

The 1990 letter from liberals to King Fahd calling for 10 reforms was matched within months by the “Letter of Demands” by radical clerics, operating with the backing of some members of the Council of Senior Ulama. When Lubna al-Olayan, one of the powerful al-Olayan business family, spoke at the Jeddah Economic Forum in January 2004, with her head covered by a scarf that subsequently slipped, the response was much faster. She had spoken of female empowerment: “Without real change, there can be no real progress. If we in Saudi Arabia want to progress we have no choice but to embrace change.” The response of the Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul-Aziz al-Asheikh was unforgiving: “I severely condemn this matter and warn of grave consequences.” He went on: “What is even more painful is that such outrageous behaviour should have happened in Saudi Arabia, the land of the two holy shrines.”

Although the pressure is applied in the public arena, there is seldom public confrontation. (Perhaps the riots on the Jeddah cornice in December 2001 are a rare exception. Saudi middle-class youths ran amok, reportedly tearing scarves and hijab from the heads of Saudi women.)

### **Responses of the Saudi royal family**

Within the strategy of the Saudi royal family of being determined to stay in power, the tactics of the princes appear to be relying heavily on traditional Saudi methods of political control and compromise.

The Saudi government:

1. has appealed to family and tribe to take responsibility for young hot-heads who have caused problems. This applies as much to the women who drove in 1990, as the middle-class youth who rampaged on the Jeddah cornice in 2001, as well as to the militants who have joined al-Qaeda or similar groups.
2. has sought to co-opt the establishment clerics, confirming the legitimacy of the House of Saud while de-legitimising Islamic opponents.

3. has tried to export real and potential troublemakers by sending them to work and, if necessary, fight for Islam in other countries. In the past these destinations have been Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya. Now the destination could well be Iraq.
4. has channelled liberal protest into bodies like the consultative council but retained tight control over newspapers and has squashed any independent political body.
5. has deflected US criticism by making apparent commitments when necessary.

(On this last point, the October 13, 2003, commitment to hold elections in 14 municipal councils in 2004 emerged from a Council of Ministers meeting. Reports of city council elections in 2005 and consultative council elections in 2006 came from Saudi dissidents who had met Prince Sultan. In March 2004 Prince Sultan publicly dismissed the notion of having elections to the consultative council. But the October 2003 reports were sufficient for President Bush to make a favourable reference to Saudi Arabia in his November 2003 speech to the National Endowment on Democracy. He said: “Saudi Arabia is taking first steps toward reform, including a plan for gradual introduction of elections.”)

### **Is the Saudi royal family losing control?**

Those Islamic militants who cannot be contained by appeals to family and tribal values have to be dealt with by more conventional police methods. To the amazement of outsiders who tend to view the Saudi security authorities as “Keystone Cops”, Saudi officials do not appear to view the situation as being uncontrollable in normal police terms. Arrests have also been made of those demanding liberal reforms when they have pushed their case too far.

Saudi officials also do not express concern about the apparently new style of political debate in the kingdom. The news media have covered stories critical of government services and about crime and lawlessness totally at odds with the law-abiding image that official channels have tried to depict. This freedom appears to have encouraged by Crown Prince Abdullah who himself has visited slum areas. But, despite new freedoms, several journalists have been sacked when they have crossed an apparent line.

Whether the pressure is from the side of conservative radicals or liberal reformers, three areas of potential debate appear to be cordoned off from public discussion:

1. King Fahd

2. The Saudi role as custodian of Mecca and Medina
3. Oil policy.

Until now, even the Islamic militants in the kingdom appear to have recognised these restrictions.

### **Will the policies of the House of Saud succeed?**

Assuming their purpose is for the royal family to stay in power, the challenges will arise:

1. if the throne is contested when King Fahd dies
2. if Saudi custodianship of Mecca and Medina is threatened by either internal or external forces
3. if oil policies do not provide enough revenues to meet domestic budget requirements.

The earliest test is likely to be the death of King Fahd, or the death of a senior prince such as Abdullah or Sultan, which will cause the issue of the next succession to be re-opened. The likelihood that succession will not be as smooth as it has been in the past, or there will be a series of short reigns of very old men, will clearly have implications for policy decision-making.

For the United States, Saudi measures against Islamic radicals will remain the immediate principle concern, closely followed by the need for the kingdom to maintain its leading role in the international oil market, along with its policy of fair pricing. Given Saudi resistance to change, pressure for reform is likely to be concentrated on reform of the education system and control of Islamic charities, rather than broader political participation, despite public rhetoric to the contrary.

For Islamic militants, the reduced US influence in the kingdom can be seen as a political victory but the next step, the overthrow of the House of Saud, remains a considerable obstacle because of its apparently united determination to survive and its many levers of control.

Like a series of plastic overlays the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is facing a number of crises:

- Differences over policy in Iraq.
- Differences on the timeliness of US intervention to secure peace between Israel and the Palestinians.
- Differences over oil policy.
- Differences on the nature of the threat posed by fundamentalist Islam.

Although the two countries might agree on these areas of difference, there appears to be little or any agreement on any ordering of the differences. There is also no agreement on magnitude with the US perception of a clash of civilisations between the West and Islam being neither appreciated nor recognized in Riyadh.

In the U.S. any progress on the issues will probably have to wait until after the November 2004 presidential elections and possibly until after the inauguration in January 2005. Elections are certainly one issue that are not distracting the Saudi leadership internally within the kingdom. But the delay caused by the US elections just means the current Saudi leadership will be older and perhaps even more infirm when both countries can turn again to a proper discussion. That age factor is a central part of the problem.