

Keys to the Kingdom: Inside Saudi Arabia's Royal Family

March 29 2009

The crown prince is seriously ill, and Saudi Arabia's normally secretive royal family is openly clashing over who will take the throne, reports Hugh Miles

A dispute over Saudi Arabia's royal succession burst into the open yesterday, revealing a power struggle in which one of the most senior princes in the oil-rich kingdom is reported to have disappeared. The prospect of instability in a country that is not only the world's largest oil exporter but also a key Western ally at the heart of the Middle East will cause serious concern in Washington, London and beyond.

Rumours are rife over the position of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, 60, son of the heir to the Saudi throne, who has not been seen in public for weeks. Prince Bandar is better known abroad than almost any other member of the Saudi royal family, not only for his extravagant lifestyle, but because of his daring foreign policy initiatives during 22 years as the Saudi ambassador in Washington, where he played an important role after 9/11 and during two Gulf wars. His absence from public life comes at a sensitive time in Saudi Arabia: his father, Crown Prince Sultan, is gravely ill with cancer, throwing the succession to King Abdullah into question.

One theory in political circles in Riyadh is that Prince Bandar was seeking to oust King Abdullah before Prince Sultan dies, thus placing his father on the throne. Other rumours claim that Prince Bandar is ill, or that he angered King Abdullah by dabbling in Syrian politics without authorisation. The Saudi embassy in London could not be contacted for comment last week, but this weekend political tensions in the kingdom came dramatically to the surface.

On Friday night King Abdullah unexpectedly announced the appointment of one of his half-brothers, Prince Nayef, the 76-year-old interior minister, to the post of second deputy prime minister, which had been left vacant. This was immediately taken as an indication that he would become crown prince when Prince Sultan dies or becomes king. But yesterday Prince Talal, another senior figure, publicly demanded that the king confirm that the appointment did not mean Prince Nayef would automatically become the next crown prince. Such public disagreement among senior Saudi royals is highly unusual.

Another indication of friction among the many descendants of the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Ibn Saud, who had 22 wives and more than 50 children, was the publication of a report last week by the Saudi National Society for Human Rights, one of the country's two human rights organisations. It was highly critical of Prince Nayef's draconian interior ministry, and is unlikely to have been released without the express say-so of another powerful member of the royal family. Both Crown Prince Sultan and

Prince Nayef are members of the "Sudairi Six", the powerful surviving sons of Ibn Saud and his favourite wife, Hassa bint Ahmad Al-Sudairi. The seventh and eldest brother was King Fahd, who

died in 2005; when he nominated his successor, in line with tradition, he bypassed his full brothers and chose Abdullah as crown prince.

The vying for position is intensified by Crown Prince Sultan's poor health. Aged about 85, he was first diagnosed with colon cancer in Jeddah in 2004. He has received treatment in Geneva and the US, and spent time convalescing in Morocco. Throughout his illness, Prince Nayef and another of the six brothers – Prince Salman, 73, the governor of Riyadh and another potential candidate for the succession – have stayed close to the crown prince's side. Three weeks ago Prince Nayef surprised viewers of prime-time Saudi TV by telephoning in during the news hour to tell viewers that Prince Sultan was recovering well, and would be returning home soon.

More independent information about the prince's condition has been suppressed, however. Last year, the long-serving Reuters bureau chief in Riyadh, Andrew Hammond, was told to leave the kingdom after reporting that Prince Sultan had cancer.

"I think Prince Nayef will be the next crown prince, because he is responsible for sensitive issues like security and he is supported by the players in the royal family," commented Abdul Aziz Al Khamis, the Saudi editor of Arabian Observer magazine, "but it is like a card game. Each plays his cards – power, security, money – and it's a very tough game."

