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Saudi Arabia's Princess Sara claims asylum in the UK; Saudi Arabia's Princess Sara bint Talal bin Abdulaziz is claiming political asylum in the UK over fears for her safety back home. She tells Hugh Miles and Robert Mendick why she doesn't want to return.

By Hugh Miles and Robert Mendick

She was Saudi Arabia's "Barbie" princess; the pampered granddaughter of the Kingdom's founder and daughter of one of his most powerful and favoured sons.

Princess Sara bint Talal bin Abdulaziz, however, is claiming political asylum in the UK over fears for her safety back home.

The claim, the first ever made by such a senior member of the ruling family's inner circle, will embarrass the Saudi dynasty and threatens a diplomatic row.

Princess Sara, 38, accuses senior Saudi officials of plotting to kidnap her and smuggle her back to Riyadh, having subjected her to a "well orchestrated and malicious campaign of persecution".

She currently occupies a suite and several rooms in a five-star London hotel with her four children and two dogs, guarded by a private security team.

"I am very scared right now," she told The Sunday Telegraph at a secret location. "They know I can't go back now. There is a threat. That's a slap in the face of the Kingdom.

"I've been physically abused. I've been mentally abused. My assets have been frozen.

They've accused me of being in opposition [to them] with Iran, they haven't left anything. I've been crucified in every way."

On Friday, Princess Sara's lawyers notified the Home Office of her intention to seek asylum. Ministers must assess the truth of the allegations and decide whether to offer her a safe haven – a diplomatic dilemma because Saudi authorities want her to return.

Princess Sara has lived in the UK since 2007 after she fell out with her 80-year-old father, Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz al Saud, known as The Red Prince.

She says of her relationship with him: "Everything goes back to a certain aspect that I don't discuss in public. Something happened with my father and he didn't take it lightly. He retaliated against me and wanted to crush me. I had been his closest; I had been his

favourite. It shook my world."

While living first in the Cotswolds, then in London she won custody of her children. She has had a continuing inheritance battle with her older brother, Prince Turki bin Talal bin Abdulaziz al Saud, over their dead mother's £325 million fortune, made up of cash, jewels and property in Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Egypt and Lebanon.

She claims she was cut off from her inheritance. Saudi officials have asked her to return to Riyadh to argue her case, rather than air her grievances abroad.

Her asylum claim offers an insight into the tensions within the Saudi royal family. With the current king ill, Princess Sara was supported by her uncle, the Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz al Saud, a rival of her father's. But last month he died, leaving her exposed and seemingly prompting her push for asylum.

She grew up in a Riyadh palace with untold riches at her disposal. Asked if she was ferried everywhere by Rolls-Royce, she replied: "I hate Rolls-Royces, I love Aston Martins," before adding: "Actually I am very grounded."

Her grandfather was King Abdulaziz, the founder of the Saudi state. Her father, a radical and a reformer, was exiled briefly in the 1960s but returned to the fold, and her mother, who died of cancer in 2008, was Prince Talal's third wife. Among her 14 brothers and sisters is Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, who runs the country's sovereign wealth fund and is one of the richest men in the world.

"They called me the little Barbie as I was like this cute little girl who had everything," recalled Princess Sara of her childhood. "But my British nanny brought me up in a very strict manner.

"My branch of the family was always different from the rest of Al Saud – open, controversial and diverse. We celebrate Christmas."

She studied at the King Saud University in Riyadh, and married a royal cousin while still young. She was divorced in her twenties.

She worked with her father as he travelled in his role as an ambassador to Unicef, visiting refugee camps where she was instilled, she says, with a need to address injustice. "I just had a feeling my roles as a princess and a society lady and a reformer contradicted each other," she said. "As a princess you have more obligations you have to take seriously.

"It is not privilege. It is work, work, work. I would say I associate myself with Princess Anne [except] maybe different looks."

Wearing a V-neck sweater, leggings and running shoes, Princess Sara dresses like any Westerner and refuses to wear a veil. Her nails are bright red and her hair is in a plait because she has not had time to wash it before an interview that has taken many days – and several false starts – to organise.

Two years after she moved to the UK her passport expired, and the Saudi embassy refused to issue a new one. She is threatened with deportation because her visa has also run out. A mystery backer gives her a regular income.

"I would like the king to send an envoy to solve all these problems and give me guarantees," she said, adding that she had nothing but respect for the monarch. A previous attempt to entice her home was a disaster: as she met a Saudi official at the Dorchester Hotel in February last year, her security detail became convinced of a possible kidnapping risk. Their surveillance notes will be handed to the Home Office. She will further argue that she has been subjected "to a litany of serious crimes, including threats, assault, an attempted kidnapping and the attempted abduction of my children". The motives, she believes, are political. Princess Sara believes forces, acting independently of the king, her father and close family, are behind the alleged criminal acts. She claims that she was assaulted outside the Saudi embassy by an official who tried to grab her arm. The police were not called because the princess was trying to avoid a scandal. She has become the victim of a internet smear campaign questioning her mental stability and connecting her to the Saudi opposition and Hizbollah – allegations she denies. She wants to fight back. "I am not brave at all," she said, "I just see a cause. I know what is right and what is wrong. I have to stick to it. I want my rights and my dignity back." Yet she does not wish to challenge King Abdullah's authority, nor that of Sharia. "I am a threat because I am a reformer from within. My way is the modern Islamic way," she said. A Saudi princess has caused problems for Anglo-Saudi relations before. In 1980, the British ambassador was expelled and export orders cancelled after ITV broadcast Death of a Princess about the execution of a princess for adultery. Princess Sara is trying to bring up her four teenage children in a "strict but loving environment". During the interview, one son sent her a text message asking what film they should watch that evening. She is trying to lead, she says, a normal life. The circumstances, however, are exceptional. A Saudi embassy diplomat said: "The embassy has been involved in settling her visa issue and residency issue in the UK. We have tried to settle this issue. This matter is of a personal nature so there is only so much the government can do. It's not a political matter."

