



A Five-Star Retirement Home for Dictators

Welcome to sunny Saudi Arabia, land of fallen tyrants.

BY ELLEN KNICKMEYER | JUNE 23, 2011



JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia—Where once there were gilded gates and sweeping views, now there are parking lots, hospital ceilings, and object lessons for the Arab Spring's new dictators-in-exile to contemplate.

For the routed presidents of Tunisia and Yemen, the latest additions to Saudi Arabia's guest list of leaders no longer wanted by unappreciative homelands, exile after their people pulled the plugs on their presidencies-for-life is appearing gloomy and isolated. Their Saudi hosts are forbearing but not especially thrilled, either.

From King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the modern Saudi state, on down, the ruling al-Sauds have followed Arab tradition by offering asylum even to some toppled leaders they haven't particularly liked, Prince Turki bin Mohammed bin Saud al-Kabeer, undersecretary of the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told me in Riyadh this week.

In the case of Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the Saudis offered refuge to a leader who wasn't even an ally;

who had failed, like Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh, to support the U.S.- and Saudi-backed Gulf War after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Prince Turki said.

"This man asked for our protection. This custom is part of our life," Prince Turki, who is the Foreign Ministry's official in charge of multilateral relations, said. "You can't refuse if someone comes and asks for your assistance and protection."

Commentators and news reports have painted the conservative monarchy as the leader of a "counterrevolution" nearly as sweeping and intense as the winds of change blowing across the region. But by giving the dictators an escape hatch, the minister argued, Saudi Arabia also has often helped avoid further carnage. In the Saudis' estimation, Ben Ali's flight to Saudi Arabia effectively ended a vicious rear-guard guerrilla campaign by his militia against Tunisia's demonstrators.

In Yemen, fighting in the capital Sanaa has eased since the Saudis helped medevac Saleh and a number of his wounded aides after a deadly June 3 blast in the private mosque of Yemen's embattled and stubborn leader.

This year's trickle of ex-dictators follows the path of other once-powerful asylum-seekers to Saudi Arabia in decades past, from the cannibalistic Idi Amin of Uganda to all-but-forgotten prime ministers, presidents, and heirs-to-the-imamate.

The influx of ousted leaders exposes Saudi Arabia, which is solemnly mindful of its role as the protector of Islam's two holiest cities, to some resentment and chaff.

"How long until King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz changes his title to 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and Unwanted Despots'?" one wag **tweeted recently**.

"This tradition of this regime is to bring in the company of toppled dictators ... as if our country was a dumpster," Mohammed al-Qahtani, an outspoken rights activist, complained to me in a recent conversation in Riyadh.

Tunisia's Ben Ali, the first Arab leader this year to face a decision of fight or flight, arrived in Jeddah in January with an entourage that included his intensely unpopular wife and, according to rumor in Tunisia, 1.5 tons in gold.

Ben Ali had flown out of Tunis ahead of vast crowds filling the squares of his capital and other cities and towns to demand he relinquish power after more than two decades. France and Italy were among the countries that reportedly turned away Ben Ali's plane on Jan. 14, before Saudi Arabia let him land.

The Tunisian leader's home away from home, Jeddah, is a breezy and comparatively relaxed city on the Red Sea. Press reports have identified Ben Ali's Saudi abode as a long-out-of-use palace that King Faisal once used to house honored guests.

The cream- and lemon-colored palace remains both imposing and graceful, with grilled gates and high walls. But time and urban sprawl have overtaken the compound, which abuts Jeddah's diplomatic neighborhood. Drive-bys this week showed shards of splintered plywood jammed into one gate to block the view inside. While the palace faces the sea, a parking lot and busy main road stand between the Tunisian ex-president and the beach. A bustle of guards and the light-colored, American-made sedans favored by Saudi officials at the back gate suggested a dignitary was indeed in residence.

Ben Ali's old home, outside Tunis, was a gleaming, gilded palace draped in magenta bougainvillea and hugging a lush green shore of the Mediterranean. On the glittering morning when I **drove past in January**, with blue sky and sea gleaming past the palace walls, my Tunisian cab driver broke into a smile at the thought that his country's longtime leader was not there to enjoy the view. "No, Ben Ali, he is in Saudi Arabia," the cabbie said, laughing.

Ben Ali's mere presence in Jeddah now raises uncomfortable mental associations in Saudi Arabia -- reminding, for instance, that leaders sometimes rob and kill their people, and that people can overthrow their leaders.

A block from the palace, a Saudi man heading into a coffee shop apologized and excused himself when I asked him whether people around the neighborhood ever saw the fallen Tunisian leader. "Please, this is a political matter," he said. "These times..."

In fact, Ben Ali has been notable in Jeddah for not being notable, journalist and political commentator Jamal Khashoggi told me in Riyadh. There has been no gossip of Ben Ali accepting a dinner invitation, Ben Ali strolling in one of the city's malls, Khashoggi said. "He's never been spotted out."

Publicly, Ben Ali hasn't been grateful, either. This week, as a court in Tunisia quickly tried and convicted him and his wife in absentia of embezzlement and misuse of state funds, Ben Ali issued a **statement** saying he had never meant to leave Tunisia in the first place.

Ben Ali flew to Saudi Arabia only to escort his family to safety, but the crew of the plane disobeyed orders and left the kingdom without him, he said in the statement. The ousted president did not explain why he had not availed himself of any of the regular commercial flights between Riyadh and Tunis since then.

A nice villa in Jeddah presumably would have been on offer to Yemen's Saleh, too, had he signed an accord sponsored by Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that would have had the Yemeni leader yield power after three increasingly tumultuous decades.

Instead, Saleh recanted on signing -- three times. It took the June 3 explosion at his mosque to send the reportedly bleeding and burned Saleh, other wounded survivors of the bombing, and 35 members of the president's family to Saudi Arabia. Unknown members of Saleh's inner circle are widely suspected to have played a role in the explosion.

For Saleh, his determination to resist national and international calls for him to yield power mean that his exile -- either in part or in full -- is being spent in a bed in a Riyadh military hospital.

Saleh's condition currently is "not serious, but not comfortable," Prince Turki told me, a rare on-the-record comment on the Yemeni leader's condition, which has been the subject of many an anonymous rumor over the past few weeks. Saleh was weeks, not days, away from being able to travel if he chose, the prince said. Saleh was well enough to promise King Abdullah in a telephone call earlier this month that he was ready now to sign the GCC deal to give up office, the prince said, but Saleh, who is on painkillers, has not been ready to speak to executives of the GCC directly.

Whether or not Saleh signs what effectively is his resignation, Saudi officials say they feel they cannot block the Yemeni president from returning to Sanaa if he chooses.

Yet many fear the violence will pick up again if Saleh tries to return to power. In a letter made public Tuesday, June 21, Sadeq al-Ahmar, the head of Yemen's most influential tribal confederation, appealed to the Saudi monarch to keep Saleh from coming home. "His return will lead to sedition and civil war," the **sheikh warned**.

Whatever the fate of the other Arab leaders now fighting or wheedling for political survival, there is at least one among them who likely could never land a one-way ticket to Saudi, Arab hospitality or not.

Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi allegedly plotted in 2003 to assassinate then-Crown Prince Abdullah, and otherwise made himself unwelcome to the Saudi royal family, Prince Turki pointed out when I asked him of the colonel's prospects for exile in the kingdom. At an Arab League summit in 2003, an angry Crown Prince Abdullah **warned Qaddafi**: "Your lies precede you and your grave is in front of you."

The probable Saudi response if Qaddafi asked for asylum? The diplomat only shook his head.

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