

SUDDEN SUCCESSION



Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East

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E D I T O R S



Kuwait: A Changing System Under Stress

The ninety-year-old Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah is expected to be succeeded by his eighty-two-year-old half-brother Crown Prince Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah. But the key question is who will be the next-in-line heir apparent. This study looks at the most likely contenders and the implications for one of the smallest but richest Gulf states.



Kuwait, with nearly 6 percent of the world's oil reserves, is surrounded by big neighbors with which relations have often been tense. At Kuwait's independence from Britain in 1961, Baghdad immediately declared the emirate to be an integral part of Iraq, although it was forced to back down. Moreover, the memory of Saddam Hussein's 1990–91 invasion and occupation remains raw almost three decades later. In 2017, a diplomatic row erupted with Tehran after Kuwait expelled fifteen Iranian diplomats two years after an arms cache discovery linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. And, in 2018, a visit by Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman to discuss shared oil resources ended abruptly because of a failure to agree on an agenda.

Domestically, unlike the other Gulf Arab states, the power of Kuwait's ruler is constrained by a spirited National Assembly that has frequently censured government ministers. The ruling al-Sabah family shares power rather than reigns. Originally, it was a local

merchant family chosen by other leading families to manage government affairs rather than business and trade, although the discovery of oil has changed the nature of the family's rule.

Although key government positions such as the prime minister and deputy prime ministers—who also serve as ministers for defense, foreign affairs, and interior—are held by the family, only one other cabinet member (the health minister) is currently an al-Sabah. Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who is ninety and had to postpone a September 2019 meeting with U.S. president Donald Trump for health reasons, has been unique for his government experience—previously serving as foreign minister and prime minister—and for the vigor with which he has pursued a role as regional mediator. By contrast, Crown Prince Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who is eighty-two, has not been as active in politics or government for many years.

Change takes place slowly in Kuwait. For the present, members of the al-Sabah family look as if they are trying to avoid the trend that has emerged in Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Saudi Arabia, where much younger leadership has risen.



In 1922, in a harbinger of future territorial insecurity for Kuwait, a British dictate dealt two-thirds of the small country's land to what later became Saudi Arabia. This area, part of which became the so-called neutral zone, was later found to have oil, and the two nations split the rights.

Succession in Historical Perspective

Kuwait has been ruled by the al-Sabah since its members—along with other tribal families, including the al-Khalifa, the present-day rulers of Bahrain—migrated from the center of the Arabian Peninsula to the Persian Gulf coastline in the early 1700s. The al-Sabah emerged as the political representatives of Kuwait in the 1750s; they were the first to recognize Sabah bin Jaber al-Sabah (known as Sabah the First), who ruled from 1752 to 1762.

The fact that the al-Sabah came to power by consensus rather than conflict was significant. It distinguished the ruling family of Kuwait from the al-Saud in Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, the al-Khalifa in Bahrain, whose right to rule was based, at least initially, on conquest. Moreover, it gave the al-Sabah a platform of legitimate political authority that increased over time as they became tightly interwoven into the fabric of Kuwaiti society.

Principles of power sharing and consultative rule were thus enshrined in methods of governing Kuwait from an early stage.¹ The al-Sabah needed to coexist alongside the other leading families and merchants and not infrequently relied on them for economic and financial assistance.² And yet the two occasions—first in 1896 and again in 2006—when this model has been tested have been consequential vis-à-vis matters of succession.

THE LONG SHADOW OF 1896

The first rupture occurred in May 1896, when Mubarak Sabah al-Sabah killed two of his half-brothers, including the sitting ruler, Muhammad Sabah al-Sabah, and took power himself. During his nineteen-year rule, Mubarak secured British recognition of Kuwait as an entity separate from the Ottoman Empire and became known as Mubarak al-Kabir (“the Great”). He is now considered the founder of modern Kuwait.

After his death in November 1915, Mubarak was succeeded first by one son, Jaber, who died just fifteen months later, and then in February 1917 by another son, Salim, who ruled for four years until he died in 1921. Jaber’s son Ahmad, the father of current Emir Sabah, then came to power.

After 1915, a convention emerged, which was formalized in Article 4 of the post-independence constitution in 1962: succession must pass to descendants of Mubarak the Great. Although Mubarak had four sons—Hamad and Abdullah, as well as the already-noted Jaber and Salim—succession has, in practice, been limited to the descendants of Jaber and Salim.

An informal pattern arose whereby succession passed between the two branches in roughly equal measure, with one exception (see table 1).

The convention that the position of ruler would alternate between the al-Jaber and al-Salim branches of the ruling family was, before 2006, broken only once (in 1962), when Sheikh Sabah al-Salim al-Sabah was named crown prince to succeed his half-brother Emir Abdullah al-Salim al-Sabah, which he duly did when Emir Abdullah died in 1965. Both were members of the al-Salim branch of the ruling family, but the al-Sabah family council failed to reach consensus on the

TABLE 1: SUCCESSION OF EMIRS

1915–17	Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak	al-Jaber line
1917–21	Sheikh Salim al-Mubarak	al-Salim line
1921–50	Sheikh Ahmad al-Jaber	al-Jaber line
1950–65	Sheikh Abdullah al-Salim	al-Salim line
1965–77	Sheikh Sabah al-Salim	al-Salim line
1977–2006	Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad	al-Jaber line
2006	Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah al-Salim	al-Salim line
2006–present	Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir	al-Jaber line

succession because of infighting between two of the leading candidates.

The infighting and lack of consensus led to the appointment of Sabah al-Salim as a compromise candidate for crown prince who, in the words of a biographer, “would offer a period of calm to allow the future succession to be resolved.”³ The alternating system was put back on track when Jaber al-Ahmad (from the al-Jaber line) entered the line of succession as crown prince to Sabah al-Salim and eventually ruled as emir for twenty-nine years.

THE CRISIS OF 2006 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The death of Emir Jaber on January 15, 2006 (at age seventy-nine), set off the second transformation in modern Kuwaiti succession dynamics, 110 years after the events of 1896. Succession passed to Jaber’s crown prince, Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah al-Sabah, who was a member of the al-Salim branch, to which power now rotated as required by the earlier-noted informal convention.

However, the new seventy-five-year-old emir was seriously ill with a form of dementia (from which he died in 2008), and the ruling family council deemed

him medically unfit to rule. As concern mounted that Saad al-Abdullah would be incapable of taking the oath of office, senior members of the al-Sabah family, Speaker of the National Assembly Jassim al-Kharafi, and members of the National Assembly negotiated a transfer of power—unprecedented in the history of both Kuwait and other Gulf States—to the prime minister, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad.

On January 23, 2006, all fifty MPs took an unprecedented and unanimous vote and recommended that Saad al-Abdullah abdicate in favor of Sabah al-Ahmad, who was the half-brother of Emir Jaber and hence was also a member of the al-Jaber branch of the al-Sabah. He became emir the following day.⁴

What happened next constituted the second major rupture in the Kuwaiti line of succession because it did away with the post-1915 balancing between the two major branches of the ruling family. Instead of designating a successor from the al-Salim branch, as convention would have dictated, Emir Sabah first named his own half-brother, Nawaf al-Ahmad, as his crown prince and then his nephew, Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah, as his prime minister.

After 2006, the top three positions in the Kuwaiti elite (emir, crown prince, and prime minister) have, for the first time, been held by the same (al-Jaber) branch of the ruling family. This conflation had major (if unanticipated) implications. The brevity of the al-Salim's interlude in January 2006 and the fact that it was followed by a concentration of power within the al-Jaber branch and by the marginalization of al-Salim family members from major leadership positions has unbalanced the delicate equilibrium practiced since 1915. Not only did the al-Jaber branch cement its position at the apex of the al-Sabah, but also it reconfigured the power dynamic within the al-Sabah and provided volatile new ground for the intersection of factional infighting with domestic politics.

Prominent members of the al-Jaber branch, including Prime Minister Nasser al-Mohammad and Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad al-Fahd, began to stake out their own positions in advance of the eventual succession to Emir Sabah and Crown Prince Nawaf. They knew that the next crown prince would almost certainly come from one of their number rather than from the al-Salim

branch, which had, for all intents and purposes, been frozen out of the contemporary power dynamics within the al-Sabah.

The Role of the National Assembly

If one is to appreciate the intensity and complexity of the factional struggle that took place in Kuwait after 2006 and particularly during the period from 2011 to 2014, it is necessary to comprehend the role of the National Assembly in the succession process.

Article 4 of Kuwait's 1962 Constitution regulates matters of succession and stipulates that the incoming emir's choice of crown prince needs to be approved by an absolute majority in the National Assembly.⁵ Failing such approval, the emir is required to submit the names of three alternates for crown prince to the National Assembly, which then selects one of them.

The process laid down in Article 4 explains why it is so important for putative contenders for power within the al-Sabah to engage in the politics of alliance-building among members of parliament in the National Assembly. Mohammed Alwuhaib, a professor of political science at Kuwait University and head of the Kuwait Centre for Active Citizenship, has argued that "members of the Al Sabah [have] interfered in and manipulated political and economic factions as a tool to weaken each other, with allegations of corruption a particularly common tactic."⁶

THE 2011–14 INFIGHTING

After 2006, factional infighting within the ruling family escalated markedly as ambitious sheikhs in the al-Jaber branch began to construct their own power bases. During this post-2006 period, the splits within the al-Sabah did not remain an internal ruling family matter but instead entered the public arena and the political realm. Their disputes were amplified by Kuwait's media environment, which includes multimedia platforms owned by members of the ruling family, political elites, and members of the "opposition" alike.⁷

Such dynamics featured prominently in the protests that rocked Kuwait for months in 2011 just as Arab Spring political volatility coursed through other states

in the Middle East and North Africa. The two (self-proclaimed) leading candidates for crown prince, Prime Minister Nasser al-Mohammad and Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad al-Fahd, engaged in a prolonged struggle for influence that was intended to strengthen their own position and weaken their rival.⁸

In June 2011, several months after political protests began in North Africa and spread rapidly across much of the Middle East, members of the National Assembly who supported Prime Minister Nasser al-Mohammad aggressively questioned Ahmad al-Fahd over allegations of improprieties in government contracts, leading to Sheikh Ahmad's resignation as deputy prime minister.⁹

Two months later, political supporters of Ahmad al-Fahd were involved in the "discovery" of documents suggesting that up to one-third of MPs were involved in what rapidly became the largest political corruption scandal in Kuwaiti history.¹⁰ Initial allegations in August 2011 indicated that \$92 million had been transferred into the accounts of two MPs. By October 2011, allegations widened to include suspected payments of \$350 million to sixteen MPs (nearly one-third of the Assembly's fifty-strong body)—allegedly in return for their support of government policy.¹¹

Further allegations in October 2011 by Musallam al-Barrak, a firebrand opposition MP who was associated closely with Ahmad al-Fahd, implied that millions of Kuwaiti dinars had been transferred from the Central Bank of Kuwait to the prime minister through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such allegations had an immediate consequence as they led respected Harvard- and Oxford-trained Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammad al-Sabah (the last remaining member of the al-Salim branch of the ruling family in a senior government post) to resign in protest.

Mass rallies in November 2011 led Emir Sabah to accept, with reluctance, Nasser al-Mohammad's resignation as prime minister, meaning that within the space of six months supporters of both Ahmad al-Fahd and Nasser al-Mohammad effectively had taken out their opponent.

The factional skirmishing between the camps did not end, however. It escalated dramatically in December 2013 when allies of Ahmad al-Fahd claimed to possess tapes purportedly showing that Nasser al-Mohammad

was plotting against the Kuwaiti government. After the coup allegations were revived in April 2014, the Kuwaiti government immediately imposed a total media blackout to avoid any media reporting or other discussion of the issue.¹²

In March 2015, Ahmad al-Fahd issued a public apology on Kuwait television and renounced the coup allegations.¹³ Since then, he has spent much of his time outside Kuwait, and numerous associates of his have been targeted and detained by the Kuwaiti authorities on various charges. Those actions have weakened his support base considerably while restoring stability to Kuwaiti politics because his anti-status quo challenge has been quashed.

Who Will Be the Next Crown Prince?

Kuwaiti politics has calmed down after an extended period of political turmoil between 2006 and 2013 that saw six National Assembly elections in seven years and more than a dozen governments rise and fall over the same period. If the current National Assembly, elected in November 2016, runs to November 2020, it will have become the first since the 1999–2003 parliament to have members complete their four-year terms.

It is likely not a coincidence that the return to comparative political stability coincided with the end of the damaging period of ruling family factionalism (previously described). That said, the succession issue remains and is—by the natural passage of time—closer today than it was between 2011 and 2014, when the infighting was at its most intense.

It is worth reiterating that the immediate successor to Emir Sabah will be Crown Prince Nawaf al-Ahmad unless the prince predeceases his older half-brother. Nawaf al-Ahmad was born in June 1937 and served two spells as minister of interior and minister of defense, as well as deputy chief of the National Guard and first deputy prime minister during the premiership of Emir Sabah between 2003 and 2006. Nawaf al-Ahmad has four sons and a daughter and is seen by many in Kuwait as an uncontroversial choice as emir, albeit probably serving only a short-term considering his age. His uncertain health may also affect both the length and the

vigor of his time as emir. These facts, together with his easygoing personality, make it more likely that whoever becomes his crown prince will have the opportunity to more forcefully shape the direction of Kuwaiti leadership.

The former prime minister, Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad, remains in the frame to become the next crown prince although his age—seventy-eight—may count against him, particularly if Kuwaitis wish to avoid a Saudi-type scenario whereby leadership passes among a succession of elderly rulers. Nasser al-Mohammad was believed to have been Emir Sabah's preferred candidate for succession during the factional struggle with Ahmad al-Fahd. He retains the support of much of the political and economic establishment in Kuwait, including support from the powerful merchant family business elites.

In addition to his age, Nasser al-Mohammad may encounter opposition from Saudi Arabia's leadership as a result of his warm relationship with Kuwait's Shia communities and the decade he spent as Kuwait's ambassador to Iran in the 1970s. Officials in Kuwait have watched closely the Saudi and Emirati pressure that was put on Qatar's new emir—pressure that began within weeks of the Qatari succession in June 2013. Officials have also watched the more assertive policies from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to impose their own view of regional geopolitics on the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

The chances of Ahmad al-Fahd becoming crown prince have receded significantly since his dramatic *mea culpa* in March 2015 and his subsequent self-imposed exile from Kuwait. His chances were also diminished by the legal proceedings brought against him both in Kuwait and in connection with the corruption scandal that has embroiled the Fédération Internationale de Football Association, which is the governing body of world soccer, since 2015.¹⁴ Ahmad al-Fahd nevertheless remains popular among tribal and Sunni Islamist constituencies in Kuwait and cannot definitively be ruled out of any future role in Kuwait if or when political conditions change.

Whereas observers of Kuwaiti politics during the 2011–14 period saw Nasser al-Mohammad and Ahmad al-Fahd as the two main protagonists in the campaign for eventual succession, the fallout from their

prolonged struggle has opened the door for possible compromise candidates.

One name that has risen to prominence since 2016 is that of Emir Sabah's eldest son, Sheikh Nasser bin Sabah al-Sabah, following his appointment as minister of defense and first deputy prime minister. Born in 1948, Nasser bin Sabah served as his father's gatekeeper while his father was minister of the Amiri Diwan for the first ten years of Emir Sabah's rule (from 2006 to 2016). During that period, Nasser bin Sabah won plaudits for a business-like approach to development as major construction and infrastructure projects, which were channeled through the Amiri Diwan, moved toward completion. The progress was in contrast to the gridlock that was in the state sector and that had been caused partly by the fallout from the political paralysis between 2011 and 2014.

Nasser bin Sabah's record in delivering major projects may appeal in a Kuwait that seeks to restore its international investor credibility and to move decisively away from the political turmoil of the recent past. Sheikh Nasser's wife and daughter are active participants in the Kuwaiti cultural and educational scene, and he is likely seen as a "safe pair of hands" in the passage of power to a newer generation of Kuwaiti leaders. Much may depend on whether the June 2018 removal of a tumor from his lung was successful versus any deeper or longer-term health condition.¹⁵

The outside candidate—in terms of intra-family dynamics rather than personal and professional capability—would be Mohammad bin Sabah al-Sabah, the former foreign minister who (as noted earlier) resigned in 2011 and was the last remaining member of the al-Salim branch in high office. Since leaving frontline politics eight years ago, Sheikh Mohammad has focused largely on his academic interests. He holds a PhD in economics from Harvard University and has ongoing associations with Harvard and the University of Oxford.

Mohammad bin Sabah's economic expertise and record of integrity is untarnished by the recent familial struggles and would serve him well as a compromise candidate. Moreover, his age—he was born in 1955—would also be a middle ground between the current generation in power and the eventual transition to a genuinely new cadre of Kuwaiti leaders. However, the

TABLE 2: MAIN FIGURES IN AL-SABAH SUCCESSION

al-Jaber Branch	al-Salim Branch
Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, 90, emir	Mohammad bin Sabah al-Sabah, 64, ex-foreign minister
Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah, 82, crown prince and half-brother of the emir	
Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah, 78, ex-prime minister and nephew of the emir	
Nasser bin Sabah al-Sabah, 71, first deputy prime minister and minister of defense, eldest son of the emir	
Ahmad al-Fahd al-Sabah, 56, ex-deputy prime minister and nephew of the emir	

marginalization of the al-Salim branch is likely to count against Mohammad bin Sabah, and he may become a viable prospect only if there should be a complete deadlock within the family over an al-Jaber successor. In such an eventuality, the role of the al-Sabah family council and elders may come into play as it did in 2006.

To outsiders, it may seem that other al-Sabah could be considered: Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak al-Hamad al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Khalid al-Sabah, or Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Khalid al-Jarrah al-Sabah (see table 2 for the al-Sabah succession players).

Indeed, Sheikh Jaber and Sheikh Sabah are grandsons of Hamad, another son of Mubarak the Great, and so they are theoretically eligible according to the constitution. But Sheikh Jaber is seventy-seven and avoided the familial factionalism of 2011. His cousin, Sheikh Sabah, who has spent his life as a diplomat and government minister, is sixty-six.

Carrying on Emir Sabah's Legacy

Emir Sabah's legacy will be his commitment and skill as a mediator. He will be a hard act to follow—the more so because Crown Prince Nawaf, although respected, is likely to be comparatively inactive and likely will not try to emulate his half-brother.

The foreign policy of Kuwait has generally focused on creating alliances and partnerships that can protect Kuwait, calm difficulties in the region through diplomacy, and mollify tensions with the provision of foreign aid. Even if the core goals remain, the style and context of Kuwait's foreign policy will almost certainly change. The younger generation of leaders in other Gulf countries do not appear to respond as openly to the emir's preferred mediation method: shuttle diplomacy. The old way of doing things—wherein conflicts were kept behind closed doors and elders had the last word—does not appear to be preferred by or effective with the younger generation of Gulf leaders. At a time when the broader Gulf region is polarized and the GCC is divided as never before, Emir Sabah's departure will remove one of the great moderating influences in regional affairs.

The question of who will become the next crown prince will dominate Kuwaiti political life in the immediate term after the passing of Emir Sabah, and may trigger internal jockeying—as well as external meddling—if ambitious contenders for the vacant post compete against each other using the National Assembly as a potent political tool. The resumption of ruling family factionalism would risk undermining the fragile political calm that has descended on Kuwait since 2015.

The domestic action will probably focus on the new crown prince—in all likelihood Emir Sabah's son

Nasser—further establishing his credentials. But whatever space Sheikh Nasser is given by the wider al-Sabah family and the rest of Kuwait's citizen population, this support may not be sufficient in a regional context. Sheikh Nasser is well regarded but may effectively be constrained by the new emir's asserting his leadership—even modestly. Regional bad actors could play on that tension.

Kuwait lies geographically and strategically at the intersection of regional tensions with Iran and intra-GCC differences after the 2017 rift with Qatar. Thus, Kuwaiti succession will take place in a Gulf that is divided among three main camps: the Saudis and Emiratis on one end; the Qataris on the other end; and the Kuwaitis and Omanis somewhere in the middle, trying to pull the Gulf states back together. Any additional imbalance from Kuwait—or Oman, which also has an elderly leader and an uncertain succession—risks increasing the regional volatility further and perhaps

once again increasing Kuwait's own vulnerability to its neighbors.

Kuwait is an important regional partner for the United States, including in its provision of facilities for U.S. Air Force operations across Iraq and Syria. The 1991 U.S.-led liberation from Iraqi occupation continues to be an example of Washington's regional commitment despite the changed atmospherics today. Yet Kuwait, when compared with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, has retained a distance from the Trump administration's attempts at achieving an Israel-Gulf rapprochement. Even Qatar and Oman have been more open to quiet political engagement with Israel.

Despite this arrangement, Washington should not attempt to be involved in the politics that will envelop Kuwait as the coming succession and the next one are clarified. Instead, the United States should seek to provide the most stable regional environment possible while the process plays itself out.

Notes

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