

Kuwait's Precarious Mediation Role May Be Imperiled by the Emir's Passing

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Brief Analysis

The country's six decades as regional intermediary have been undercut in recent years by younger Gulf leaders less inclined to traditional methods of conflict resolution, and Sheikh Sabah's death may put this role at further risk.

At a time when the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are more bitterly divided than ever, Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah's departure from the scene removes one of the great moderating influences in Middle Eastern affairs. The late leader had been a fixture in public life since he began a forty-year tenure as Kuwait's foreign minister in 1963, prior to becoming prime minister in 2003 and emir in 2006. Like Sheikh Zayed of the United Arab Emirates and Sultan Qaboos of Oman, he will go down in regional history as a singular figure who shepherded his country into modern times. He was instrumental in creating the GCC in 1981 and used his version of shuttle diplomacy to keep the six member states broadly in sync. More recently, however, even his magic touch had depreciated as the next generation of Gulf leadership assumed power, and a [potential succession battle](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kuwait-a-changing-system-under-stress) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kuwait-a-changing-system-under-stress>) to determine the next crown prince could hurt Kuwait's chances of continuing his role as regional mediator.

A VULNERABLE STATE

Sheikh Sabah's decades-long emphasis on diplomacy was not only a reflection of his personal skill set, but also a protective strategy born from Kuwait's geographic vulnerability. In the 1920s, the country lost some two-thirds of its territory to the al-Saud family under a British dictate. In addition, the Saudis imposed an economic blockade and threatened complete annexation. After Kuwait achieved formal independence in 1961, Iraq claimed the country as part of its territory just six days later. In the decades that followed, the notion that Kuwait was Iraq's "19th province"

lingered, perpetuating anxiety among the citizenry. Repeated border incursions and skirmishes occurred throughout the 1970s while Sheikh Sabah was foreign minister, shaping his view of Iraq as a constant threat. These fears were realized when Saddam Hussein invaded in 1990, just three years after the jarring Tanker War that saw Kuwaiti-flagged ships attacked by Iran.

Given this history of vulnerability, Sheikh Sabah focused on building partnerships that could protect Kuwait, including with the United States and GCC. He also sought to mollify tensions through the provision of foreign aid and mediate conflicts to calm a volatile neighborhood. The latter focus earned him the nickname “the dean of Arab diplomacy.” Under his direction, Kuwait is credited with easing tensions or resolving conflict between Saudi Arabia and Egypt in North Yemen (1968), Bangladesh and Pakistan (1974), Abu Dhabi and Dubai (1979), Saudi Arabia and Libya (1982), Oman and South Yemen (1984), and Turkey and Bulgaria (1989), among others.

END OF AN ERA?

Over the past few years, however, this gift for shuttle diplomacy seemed to lose its potency amid new regional dynamics and a younger generation of Gulf leaders. In December 2017, Kuwait hosted the first GCC Summit to be held since the ongoing regional rift over Qatar erupted, but the event fell apart after its first morning session. Then, in September 2018, Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman met with the emir in Kuwait but apparently cut his visit short. Sheikh Sabah’s project to patch up the rift stalemated thereafter, notwithstanding consistent U.S. backing for his efforts. Ultimately, the emir was unable to convince the increasingly powerful crown princes in Riyadh or Abu Dhabi to reconcile with Doha, and his reportedly close relationship with the emir of Qatar was not enough either.

These setbacks point to a wider shift away from the Gulf’s old way of conflict resolution, in which disputes were addressed behind closed doors, trusted intermediaries were dispatched to iron out a path to reconciliation, ample room was allowed for face-saving, and elders often had the last word. This model still had some potency in 2014, when the guidance of another elder statesman, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, reportedly helped mollify a previous spike in the growing GCC rift. By 2017, however, this method was out. The gloves were off, and the very public nature of the rift—underscored by citizens being tacitly allowed to criticize regional states and leaders on social media to an unprecedented degree—prevented any of the parties from saving face without the other side capitulating.

Emir Sabah’s passing therefore represents the end of an era in GCC relations, paving the way for reshaping Kuwait’s role among its neighbors and, perhaps, recalibrating broader Gulf diplomacy. The loss of a respected mediator—who at minimum could de-escalate crises even as his ability to resolve them diminished—may make the region even more volatile. If Sheikh Sabah could not convince Gulf leaders to come to the table, how will the new emir or his eventual successor command such respect?

Moreover, no other Gulf state is positioned to assume this role if Kuwait cannot. Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are all participants in the rift, which has extended to proxy battles from Libya to the Horn of Africa. Oman, the lone remaining GCC member, plays a slightly different role as facilitator rather than mediator, and its policy of neutrality on hot-button issues (e.g., the Qatar rift, the Yemen war, and Iran) has frequently aggravated Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

FOCUS ON STABILITY

Kuwait’s initial succession process has been smooth, with Crown Prince Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah (age eighty-three) sworn in as emir. But the country’s longer-term posture is more likely to be determined by who becomes the next crown prince (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/emirs-death-leaves-kuwait-vulnerable-to-gulf-rivals>). Well before Emir Sabah’s passing, the prospect of being named as Sheikh Nawaf’s heir apparent had already triggered jockeying for position among potential front-runners. That jockeying will likely continue in the near term, especially since Kuwait’s succession dynamics are complicated by the National

Assembly's constitutionally mandated involvement in selecting the crown prince. A protracted succession battle would further hurt the country's chances of reviving its mediator role.

Perhaps more worryingly, if Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or the UAE find an ally in Emir Nawaf or the next crown prince, they could tilt the Gulf rift toward one camp without resolving any of the grievances that started the dispute in the first place. Attempts to curry favor may already be underway as each Gulf state decides who will visit Kuwait to offer condolences. Regional diplomats have also expressed concern that the younger, more assertive leadership in the above states may choose to meddle in Kuwaiti succession politics through the National Assembly, setting a dangerous precedent.

In light of these risks, the United States should methodically and publicly signal its support for Kuwait's stability. In an initial positive sign, the Trump administration sent a delegation led by Defense Secretary Mark Esper to offer condolences for Sheikh Sabah's passing. This is a welcome step after it committed the diplomatic gaffe of sending a low-level delegation to Oman this January following the death of Sultan Qaboos, who had similarly been a steadfast U.S. friend for fifty years. The administration **made amends by sending** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/challenges-await-omans-new-sultan-as-mourning-period-ends>) Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to be Oman's first international guest after the forty-day mourning period, and the Esper delegation to Kuwait indicates that it may have further learned its lesson. Indeed, Kuwait's commitment as a U.S. partner and its importance to U.S. interests in the region should not be undersold. As the potentially perilous process to choose a new crown prince commences, Washington would be best served by expressing how much it values the moderation that Kuwait's emir has traditionally brought to this quarrelsome region.

Elana DeLozier is the Rubin Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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