

Gulf Succession: Qatar's Model Could Be a Way Forward

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Brief Analysis

With most of the leaders of the conservative Arab Gulf states old or in poor health, abdication in favor of a younger generation may invigorate moribund hereditary leaderships, though a one-size-fits-all solution is not feasible.

On October 23, former Qatari emir Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani died at age eighty-four, closing a chapter of Gulf history. Back in 1972, Sheikh Khalifa pushed his cousin from power, but was later usurped by his son Hamad in 1995. This prompted outrage in Qatar's neighbors, who hated the precedent of a son overthrowing a father. Then, in 2013, Emir Hamad abdicated in favor of his third-oldest son, Tamim, the first apparently uncontested transition of power in Qatar in a hundred years. Just thirty-six years old, Tamim has four sons from his three wives, but for now the designated heir apparent is his half-brother, Abdullah. Additionally, Tamim's predecessor remains an advisor as "Father Emir," though the extent of his influence is unclear -- some Gulf officials assert that he is still very much in charge.

Whatever the true scope of Qatar's generational handoff, the country's succession-by-abdication approach could serve as a template for its neighbors. Yet historical rivalries between the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council -- Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman -- may compel them to pursue other paths, or just put off any decision indefinitely.

SAUDI ARABIA

Increasingly, the kingdom's crucial decisionmaker is seen as thirty-one-year-old Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (aka MbS) rather than eighty-year-old King Salman or fifty-seven-year-old Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (aka MbN). The king, described by the *New York Times* as suffering from "memory lapses," is believed to favor MbS, the eldest son of his favorite wife, as his successor.

Making that happen anytime soon would be a challenge, however. For one thing, Saudi kings traditionally keep going until they drop -- King Abdullah died in 2015 at ninety-two, and King Fahd was eighty-four when he eventually passed away in 2005, ten years after suffering a debilitating stroke. Palace politics and rivalries may pose a formidable obstacle as well. King Salman has already exercised his royal authority to change the crown prince, naming MbN three months after taking the throne, so he could do so again at any time. Yet whether MbN and the wider royal family would accept MbS being made crown prince or the king abdicating in his favor is debatable, since support for the young prince's forceful policies as defense minister and economic "visionary" is hardly universal.

KUWAIT

The current emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, is eighty-seven, and the crown prince is his half-brother Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah (age 79). Traditionally, succession has flip-flopped between the al-Ahmed and al-Salem branches of the al-Sabah family, but the al-Salem branch is being skipped in the current lineup. Moreover, Kuwait is unique among Arab Gulf states in that any prospective emir must first win approval from the national assembly, an elected body. Sheikh Sabah has just dissolved the assembly, and elections will be held in November, reopening the question of whether Sheikh Nawaf will one day win approval.

BAHRAIN

Sixty-six-year-old King Hamad's designated successor is his eldest son, Crown Prince Salman (age 47), but there is speculation that Salman would prefer to be replaced by a younger son, Royal Guard commander Sheikh Nasser (29). The more crucial impending decision concerns the king's uncle Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman (80), the long-serving prime minister and manipulator of palace politics. Khalifa and his allies in the Sunni royal family have taken a hardline stance against Bahrain's Shiite majority population, in contrast with Crown Prince Salman's embrace of political concessions, so they may see the young Sheikh Nasser as a more pliable future king.

THE UAE

Founded in 1971 by Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan of Abu Dhabi, the post of president of the confederation is technically elected every five years by the heads of the seven emirates. When Zayed died in 2004, his son Sheikh Khalifa was "chosen," but he effectively inherited the role given Abu Dhabi's oil wealth. Khalifa has been unwell for many years, however, and suffered a stroke in January 2014. While decrees are still formally announced in his name, de facto leadership of both Abu Dhabi and the UAE has passed to his half-brother Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed (age 55).

Yet it is unclear what will happen once Muhammad bin Zayed becomes the formal ruler -- will he want power to go to his sons (Khalid bin Muhammad, the recently appointed chairman of state security, has been mentioned as a possibility) or to his brothers? Whatever happens, the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum (67), who is notionally the confederation's vice president, will continue to be sidelined, along with his sons. Dubai may have the glitz, but Abu Dhabi is the center of power; the other five emirates don't count.

OMAN

Sultan Qaboos (age 75) is rarely seen in public, and when he appeared at a military parade in November 2015, he was noticeably gaunt and remained seated. Previously, he spent eight months at a German clinic for treatment of what was believed to be colon cancer.

On October 14, Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi unconvincingly declared that the sultan was "well" and "in good health." He also told a Saudi newspaper that Omani succession was "arranged in a clear way," and that "people are more worried outside the country than inside." Qaboos is no longer married and has no children, so his successor will be decided by the extended royal family. Three cousins are judged the most likely candidates at present; if the

family cannot agree, the sultan has apparently written a letter naming his choice in the event of a deadlock.

CONCLUSION

Washington's hopes for strong, accountable leadership in its Gulf allies must be balanced against local preferences, and must avoid any appearance of interference in domestic affairs. The Qatari example holds promise -- although it is just one way forward and cannot apply in all circumstances, it shows that Gulf leaders may be seeking new approaches to historical challenges.

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