

The Iran Angle of Ras al-Khaimah's Succession Struggle

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The October 27 death of a long-serving Arab ruler in an obscure Persian Gulf sheikhdom has the potential to alter the tense relationship between the region's Arab states and Iran, while also testing the ruling style and adaptability of hereditary, quasimonarchical Arab states. Tiny but strategically situated Ras al-Khaimah, part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has a long-standing territorial dispute with Tehran: the 1971 loss of two islands to Iranian control was keenly felt by the late Sheikh Saqr bin Muhammad al-Qasimi. Now two of his sons are at odds over who should replace him.

Elder son Sheikh Khaled bin Saqr is effectively under "palace arrest," with newly installed concertina wire encircling his compound and UAE federal security forces with armored troop carriers serving as guards, preventing him from attending his father's funeral. The situation is reminiscent of a weekend of turmoil in 2003, when the late Sheikh Saqr switched the title of crown prince from Khaled to a younger son -- Saud, Khaled's half-brother (see [PolicyWatch #769, "Succession Politics in the Conservative Arab Gulf States: The Weekend's Events in Ras al-Khaimah" \(/templateC05.php?CID=1647\)](#)) Back then, shots were fired, and Khaled supporters protested in the streets and forced members of the local guard to retreat behind the high walls of the ruler's palace before UAE forces intervened.

Since then Khaled has waged a public relations battle reaching as far as the United States, from lobbying the halls of power to placing advertisements on the sides of Washington, D.C., buses. His tactics have also included depicting the governing style of Saud -- who has served as de facto ruler since 2003 given their father's increasing age and ill health -- as being pro-Iranian.

Background

Ras al-Khaimah lies across the Gulf from Iran and a few miles south of the Strait of Hormuz, through which an estimated 40 percent of the world's internationally traded oil is shipped daily. It is the fourth largest of the seven United Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi, the largest and most oil rich, dominates the federation; Dubai has only a small amount of oil but excels as a business center; Sharjah, which to the casual eye seems effectively part of metropolitan Dubai, shares its main oil field with Iran, with which it reluctantly accepts joint administration of the island of Abu Musa; and the remaining three emirates, Ajman (the smallest), Umm al-Quwain (the least populous), and Fujairah (on the other side of the Strait of Hormuz).

Historically, Ras al-Khaimah was one of the so-called Trucial States. These were sheikhdoms forced to accept truces in the early nineteenth century with the British navy, which was determined to end their proclivity for piracy. Half the size of Rhode Island, the sheikhdom has only one town of any size, the eponymous city of Ras al-Khaimah, which nestles around a natural harbor. (One of the 9/11 hijackers was from the city, the son of a prayer leader at a local mosque.)

Sheikh Saqr, who often wore a patch over an eye lost to the attentions of a pet falcon, had ruled for sixty-two years with canny caution. Though resentful of losing the islands of Greater and Lesser Tunb to Iran -- both of which sit between the main tanker shipping lanes in the Gulf -- he was careful to steer clear of directly antagonizing Tehran. But when British forces -- which had acquiesced to Iran seizing the islands under the shah -- left the Gulf, Sheikh Saqr held back from joining the newly formed UAE until receiving guarantees that the new nation would not relinquish its claim to recovering the islands. Since then, the UAE has regularly issued statements protesting what it regards as occupation of the islands and has resisted Iran's calls for a negotiated agreement on their future, believing that this tactic would allow Iran to retain sovereignty.

UAE Backing for New Ruler

In the short time since Sheikh Saqr's death, Abu Dhabi has pushed for Sheikh Saud's succession. Rulers of the other sheikhdoms, sitting as the Federal Supreme Council, expressed full backing for him, declaring that "he continues his father's legacy of supporting the federation of the UAE." Despite this, Sheikh Khaled has posted a video of himself on YouTube proclaiming himself the new ruler: "[I]n the coming days and weeks I will be meeting with my family and friends and members of the Supreme Council, rulers of the emirates, outlining my agenda for the first hundred days of my lawful leadership pursuing legal implementation of my father's vision for Ras al-Khaimah."

Analysts expect Saud's rule to establish itself -- U.S. officials do not give any credence to Khaled's counterclaims, and last year the UAE embassy reportedly circulated a letter saying that he was misrepresenting himself as being a UAE official. And although Khaled now depicts himself as pro-American, he was previously critical of U.S. policy. During an interview earlier this month, Sheikh Saud, who was educated at the University of Michigan, called his brother's claims "outrageous" but also expressed hope that the two could be reconciled.

Iran Watches

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has been disdainful of the hereditary leaderships of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. Tehran will be watching the current succession discord closely, particularly if it leads to any change in the UAE's stated determination to recover the disputed islands. As it is, the UAE's rhetoric on the issue seems to have weakened over the past decade.

Sheikh Saqr's death comes just as a media war has erupted over whether the water between Iran and the GCC countries is properly titled the "Persian Gulf" or the "Arabian Gulf." The spat reportedly began when U.S. assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs Andrew Shapiro referred to "the Arabian Gulf and the broader Middle East" while making an announcement regarding the proposed \$60 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia on October 20. Iranian bloggers leapt into action at what they saw as either a U.S. official's mistake or a policy change.

Traditionally, the State Department has strictly kept to the formulation "Persian Gulf" (though journalists have pointed out that the U.S. military is more relaxed about the issue). The regional map of the Middle East downloadable from the CIA World Factbook website uses "Persian Gulf" as well. According to a note on the website regarding the use of names, "The Factbook staff follows the guidance of the United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN). The BGN is the component of the United States Government that develops policies, principles, and procedures governing the spelling, use, and application of geographic names.... Its decisions enable all departments and agencies of the US Government to have access to uniform names of geographic features." Indeed, the BGN website includes a report titled "United States Board on Geographic Names, Foreign Names Committee, Geographic Names Standardization Policy: Iran, Version 2.31." Approved by "BGN Foreign Names Committee Staff" and the "National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, Political Geography Division," the report states: "Iran and the countries of the Arabian Peninsula use different names for the body of water between them. Iran uses Khalij-e Fars (Persian Gulf). The Arabian countries use the name Al-Khalij al-Arabiyyah (Arabian Gulf). The BGN-approved conventional name for that feature is 'Persian Gulf.'"

Secretary Shapiro's apparent misspeaking was preceded a few days earlier by Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's visit to Tehran, which produced linguistic controversy of its own. On October 18, he was photographed shaking hands with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad in front of a map clearly labeled "Persian Gulf." The Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, already tend to view al-Maliki as an Iranian stooge, and his Tehran photo-op likely confirmed their prejudices.

Conclusion

A week of official mourning has been announced for Ras al-Khaimah. When it is over, people will wait to see how the al-Qasimi family squabble is resolved, and whether the UAE or Ras al-Khaimah signal any nuanced shift in posture regarding the disputed Tunb islands. Meanwhile, U.S. officials will likely be explaining whether the BGN-approved name for the Persian Gulf has changed or not.

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