

Succession Politics in the Conservative Arab Gulf States: The Weekend's Events in Ras al-Khaimah

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Jun 17, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

The normally sleepy shaykhdom of Ras al-Khaimah, part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), was wracked by gunfire and street protests over the weekend after the aged and frail ruler, Shaykh Saqr bin Mohammed al-Qassimi, switched the title of crown prince from one of his seven sons to another. Sword-waving supporters of the deposed son, Shaykh Khalid, forced members of the emiri guard to retreat behind the high walls of the ruler's palace. A semblance of order was restored only after Abu Dhabi, the lead emirate of the UAE, sent armored vehicles to Ras al-Khaimah. Shaykh Khalid still contests the change, but troops have prevented supporters from reaching his palace. Although he is an outspoken critic of the United States, his removal flies in the face of certain U.S. policy objectives.

Succession in Ras al-Khaimah

Ras al-Khaimah is one of the few shaykhdoms of the Persian Gulf that lacks significant oil reserves. Just 65 square miles in area, with a population of 40,000, it abuts Oman near the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Nestling beneath a backdrop of steep, rocky hills, the eponymous capital of Ras al-Khaimah quietly thrives on an economy of cement and gravel enterprises, dhow building, fishing, and, most significant, generous subsidies from Abu Dhabi, one of the world's richest oil producers.

The emir since 1948, Shaykh Saqr is the world's longest established ruler. Already more than eighty years old, he effectively handed over power in 1999 to his then-nominated successor, Shaykh Khalid. Recently, Shaykh Saqr began to reconsider his decision, in part because of a reported confrontation with Shaykh Khalid at a family council. During this confrontation, he apparently ordered the crown prince to banish his wife (Shaykha Fawqai, a playwright and women's rights activist) and demolish a local "ladies' club" that helped women with problems.

Earlier this month, Shaykh Saqr visited the ruler of Abu Dhabi, Shaykh Zayed al-Nahyan, who is also the UAE's head of state. That meeting likely decided the fate of Shaykh Khalid. Shaykh Zayed may have been concerned that Shaykh Khalid would continue to demand that Iran restore Ras al-Khaimah's sovereignty over the islands of the Greater and Lesser Tumbs, which sit astride the main shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf. The islands were seized by the Shah's

Iran in 1971, and the current regime in Tehran rejects Ras al-Khaimah's claim as well. Two years ago, under Abu Dhabi's leadership, the UAE softened its rhetoric on the issue.

Shaykh Khalid was also hostile toward the recent intervention to depose Saddam Hussayn's regime in Iraq. He led a protest march of several hundred people through Ras al-Khaimah and reportedly allowed the local radio station to broadcast a consistently anti-U.S. line. His efforts were of little consequence, however; for in recent years, Shaykh Zayed has guided the UAE as a whole into an alliance with the United States. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, U.S. tankers and drones operated from the al-Dhafra air base, and U.S. Navy ships used port facilities at Jebel Ali and Khor Fakkan. Meanwhile, the first part of the UAE's multi-billion-dollar order of eighty F-16 fighter jets was delivered.

Apparently, then, it was decided that Shaykh Khalid was no longer a safe choice for succession. A decree published on June 14 declared that, although he would retain the title of deputy ruler, his younger half-brother Shaykh Saud, a Michigan University-educated businessman, would be the new crown prince. The decision was perfectly consistent with custom among the conservative Arab Gulf states. Traditional Islamic monarchies do not operate under the rule of primogeniture; the issue of succession is decided either by nomination or by election before the death of a ruler. Yet, it remains to be seen whether Shaykh Saud will actually succeed his father. Intrigue or political violence could still decide the future leader; indeed, Shaykh Saqr himself came to power by overthrowing his uncle.

Succession in the Gulf

Despite appearances and recent events, the fine-tuning of succession procedures in Ras al-Khaimah could be emulated usefully among other conservative Arab states of the southern Gulf, where the leadership is increasingly ossified. In Abu Dhabi itself, which has never undergone an uncontested transition, Shaykh Zayed is also well over eighty years old. His crown prince is his eldest son, Shaykh Khalifa, who reportedly lacks his father's wisdom but is broadly accepted as the successor -- provided his health remains good (he has already had at least one stroke). Otherwise, rival younger brothers stand waiting. In Kuwait, both the emir and crown prince are so old and frail that day-to-day government is handled by the third in line, a cousin of the same generation. This arrangement has hampered decision making for years.

In neighboring Saudi Arabia, the succession moves from brother to brother. Yet, Crown Prince Abdullah, King Fahd's nominated successor, turns eighty this year, and the second in line, Defense Minister Prince Sultan, is seventy-nine. Although confined to a wheelchair, King Fahd still directs cabinet meetings and meets visiting heads of state. Abdication is not an option, and decisionmaking is often paralyzed as a result. For example, rivalries within the royal family are blamed for the failure to reach agreements with international oil companies on the development of gas reserves for urgently needed power and desalination plants. Similarly, Saudi backing for U.S. efforts to advance the Arab-Israeli peace process has been characterized by limited restatements of core positions rather than a shift toward normalization, which U.S. officials attempted to promote before the recent Sharm al-Shaykh summit. Theoretically, Fahd could still nominate a new and much younger crown prince, pushing Abdullah and others to one side. Alternatively, Abdullah could persuade the family council to depose the ailing king (there is precedent for this sort of move: King Saud was forced out in 1964). Indeed, many speculate that some such political development is currently being plotted in the salons of Riyadh, as a way of establishing a government more willing to confront the pressing challenges that the kingdom faces.

For the United States, the priorities of ensuring stability, maintaining working alliances, and advancing social agendas may often be at odds in the often deeply conservative social and political environment of the southern Persian Gulf. Yesterday, "shaykhs, other dignitaries, and a large number of nationals" reportedly visited Shaykh Saqr at his palace in Ras al-Khaimah in order "to congratulate him on appointing Shaykh Saud as crown prince." The official statement made no mention of women's rights.

Simon Henderson is a London-based associate of The Washington Institute. His policy paper on U.S. relations with the conservative Arab Gulf states will be published in the fall.

Policy #769

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-states)