

Palestinian Politics After Abbas Sudden Succession Essay Series

[Ghaith al-Omari](#) and [Ehud Yaari](#)

May 2020

The Washington Institute has been sponsoring a series of discussions about sudden succession in the Middle East. Each session focuses on scenarios that might unfold if a specific ruler or leader departed the scene tomorrow. Questions include these: Would the sudden change lead to different policies? Would it affect the stability of the respective countries involved, or the region as a whole? What would be the impact on U.S. interests? Would the manner of a leader's departure make a difference? The discussions also probe how the U.S. government might adjust to the new situation or influence outcomes.

This essay, eleventh in the series, looks at the Palestinian Authority, led by Mahmoud Abbas since 2005. Throughout his tenure, Abbas has studiously avoided grooming a successor, instead consolidating his control over numerous Palestinian entities and sidelining officials he perceived as threatening to his rule. When he eventually exits the scene, Abbas will leave many leadership roles to be filled—including in the PLO, Fatah movement, and national security agencies. The coronavirus pandemic appears to have altered the political dynamic somewhat, elevating Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, who has earned strong reviews for his management of the crisis.

[Ghaith al-Omari](#) is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship who previously served in various positions within the Palestinian Authority, including as advisor to then prime minister Mahmoud Abbas.

[Ehud Yaari](#) is an Israel-based Lafer International Fellow with the Institute who has earned numerous awards for his journalism and authored eight books on the Arab-Israeli conflict, including three with the late expert Zeev Schiff.

Sudden Succession Essay Series

1 | THE KING IS DEAD! DOES IT MATTER?

[Martin Kramer](#) • April 2019

This essay, first in the series, sets the scene by asking whether a major leader's departure is necessarily history changing. Martin Kramer examines past cases of unexpected departures of twentieth-century regional leaders, in Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. He suggests that the impact depends mostly on where the hand of fate interrupts the leader's career. Paradoxically, the more successful a leader has been in realizing his larger goals, the less consequential his exit.

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2 | SUDAN: THE END COMES FOR BASHIR

[Alberto Fernandez](#) • April 2019

This essay, second in the series, looks at the extremely fluid situation in Sudan, where on April 11 the military ousted longtime president Omar al-Bashir. The move followed months of peaceful protests, and appeared to mark a major turning point for the country. Still, what comes next remains uncertain, even as an interim military council has promised that the new government will be civilian run. A surprise to some will be Sudan's tradition of democracy and vibrant civil society, possibly offering hopes for a more pluralistic, open country that could inspire similar movements elsewhere in the region.

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3 | A FIFTY-YEAR REIGN? MBS AND THE FUTURE OF SAUDI ARABIA

[Simon Henderson](#) • April 2019

This essay, third in the series, shifts the lens to Saudi Arabia, rather well known for eccentric leadership transitions since the modern kingdom was founded in 1932. One monarch, Saud, was forced to abdicate in 1964 under

family pressure. The next, Faisal, was assassinated in 1975 by a nephew. King Khalid followed, but he was just a figurehead. And so on until the thirty-three-year-old phenomenon known as MbS, a modernizer who has quickly gained notoriety for his reckless administrative style. Whether he ultimately ascends the throne will entail plenty of plot twists, but it also holds serious implications for the kingdom, the future of the region, and U.S. interests.

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4 | LEBANON: LEADERSHIP OF THE STATE AND THE STATE WITHIN

Hanin Ghaddar • June 2019

This essay, fourth in the series, examines Lebanon, a country sharply divided along sectarian lines and burdened by interference from abroad. The Taif Accord, which ended Lebanon's civil war almost three decades ago, stipulated that the country's president be Christian, the prime minister be Sunni, and the parliament speaker be Shia. Today, two of these figures—President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri—are in their eighties, and both demonstrate sympathy for Hezbollah, the Shia militia and party that serves as a national power broker. The group will wield influence in any future leadership transition, but political and financial problems, arising from its involvement in the Syrian war and U.S. sanctions on its Iranian sponsor, could make for uncomfortable days ahead.

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5 | MBZ AND THE FUTURE LEADERSHIP OF THE UAE

Simon Henderson and *Kristian Coates Ulrichsen*, editors • July 2019

This essay, fifth in the series resulting from these sessions, spotlights the United Arab Emirates, the seven-member Gulf federation formed in 1971. Each emirate ostensibly enjoys equal status within the collective, but Abu Dhabi is the recognized capital and holds by far the most political and economic clout. Its de facto leader, Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, or MbZ, is therefore at the center of this study. But attempts by MbZ to consolidate power in Abu Dhabi and to pursue an activist regional foreign policy have drawn criticism from the other emirates, including Dubai. If a compromise candidate eventually emerges to lead the UAE, it could reshape the country's posture in the region as well as relations with the United States.

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6 | SHIA LEADERSHIP AFTER SISTANI

Ali Mamouri and *Mehdi Khalaji* • September 2019

This essay, sixth in the series, examines the issue of transnational *marjaiya*, the highest clerical rank in Shia Islam. The current officeholder is eighty-nine-year-old Ali al-Sistani, who is based in Najaf, Iraq. Sistani has played an important role in Iraq's post-Saddam era, supporting political reconciliation and a constitution-based society. He also opposes the "rule of the jurist" concept embodied by the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei. While the transnational reach of *marjaiya* will likely diminish after Sistani leaves the scene, the specific contours of this shift and Tehran's efforts to intervene remain an open question.

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7 | KUWAIT: A CHANGING SYSTEM UNDER STRESS

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and *Simon Henderson*, editors • October 2019

This essay, seventh in the series, discusses Kuwait, a small, oil-rich country surrounded by big neighbors with which relations have often been tense. Its leader, Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, is ninety years old and apparently in fragile health. His immediate heir, half-brother Nawaf, is not much younger at eighty-two. More important, perhaps, Nawaf lacks the current emir's adeptness as a diplomat. In a Gulf region experiencing sharp tensions, Sabah's exit will remove a much-needed node of stability. Whoever ultimately takes the helm will have a substantial legacy to uphold.

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8 | BAHRAIN AFTER THE PRIME MINISTER

Simon Henderson • November 2019

This essay, eighth in the series, looks at Bahrain, an island nation connected to Saudi Arabia by a slender causeway. Bahrain's prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, has held his position since 1971, the year his country gained independence from Britain, but he is now eighty-four and evidently in uncertain health. Potential candidates to replace him include Crown Prince Salman or even a much younger nephew, Nasser bin Hamad, mirroring the generational handover in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. But the Khawalids, an influential, once-sidelined branch of the ruling family, also merit attention as Bahrain nears the end of an era.

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9 | A CARETAKER PRESIDENT CLINGS TO LEGITIMACY IN YEMEN

[Elana DeLozier](#) • December 2019

This essay, ninth in the series, focuses on Yemen, a country now approaching its fifth consecutive year of war. Back in 2012, during a moment of national and regional consensus, the reserved, nonthreatening Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi was chosen as a temporary president. But Hadi, now seventy-four years old, has held onto power ever since, despite lacking a large base of domestic loyalists. Most important for the Yemeni people, the war needs to end with either a transitional council or elections so that a future leader enjoys the popular legitimacy Hadi lacks.

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10 | OMAN AFTER QABOOS: A NATIONAL AND REGIONAL VOID

[Simon Henderson](#), editor • December 2019

This essay, tenth in the series, covers Oman, a Gulf nation ruled by Sultan Qaboos bin Said since 1970, when he overthrew his own father. Qaboos has enjoyed wide popularity over his five decades in power, helping to build national cohesion and guiding his country into the modern era. But the sultan is seventy-nine years old and has a history of illness. To ensure national stability and continued progress, his successor will have to enact far-reaching economic reforms, aimed especially at broadening the economy beyond its current oil dependence. At the same time, a new sultan will need to navigate challenges posed by powerful neighbors such as Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

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11 | PALESTINIAN POLITICS AFTER aBBAS

[Ghaith al-Omari](#) and [Ehud Yaari](#) • May 2020

This essay, eleventh in the series, looks at the Palestinian Authority, led by Mahmoud Abbas since 2005. Throughout his tenure, Abbas has studiously avoided grooming a successor, instead consolidating his control over numerous Palestinian entities and sidelining officials he perceived as threatening to his rule. When he eventually exits the scene, Abbas will leave many leadership roles to be filled -- including in the PLO, Fatah movement, and national security agencies. The coronavirus pandemic appears to have altered the political dynamic somewhat, elevating Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, who has earned strong reviews for his management of the crisis.

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