

# SUDDEN SUCCESSION



*Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East*

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Left to right: Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa

## *Bahrain After the Prime Minister*

Bahrain's long-serving prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, is essentially irreplaceable. When he ceases to hold office, the current leadership triumvirate of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, Sheikh Khalifa, and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa will end. What new power structure will emerge is unclear. Already, discernible jockeying for influence has occurred. This study looks at possible outcomes, the key personalities involved, as well as important peripheral players.



In the political vernacular of Bahrain, King Hamad is known simply as “His Majesty.” His eldest son, Crown Prince Salman, is “the Crown Prince.” And King Hamad’s uncle, Sheikh Khalifa, is “the Prime Minister.” Their three portraits have dominated government offices for two decades. But the prime minister is, at eighty-four years old, the most senior in age and arguably the most experienced in government, having been in the role continuously since 1971, when the king’s father (the prime minister’s brother) ruled Bahrain. Although these days the prime minister is, as one local observer puts it, “increasingly inactive,” for many years the king is said to have “reigned,” while the prime minister has “ruled.”

Bahrain became fully independent in 1971 from Britain, which until that time had controlled its foreign relations. It became a kingdom in 2002 after a referendum the previous year. Hamad, who was already ruler or “emir,” instituted elections for parliament, gave women the right to vote, and released political prisoners. After 2002, Emir Hamad became known as King Hamad, the only Gulf ruler with such a title other than the Saudi monarch.

The current power structure reflects the personalities and challenges facing Bahrain, where the Sunni royal family governs a population of more than 1.4 million, of whom nearly half are expatriate workers and their families.<sup>1</sup> Of the citizens, the majority, usually estimated around 65 percent, are Shia. Official public data, for its part, makes no distinction between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Government officials frequently claim informally that the split is fifty-fifty or that Shia are now a minority.

King Hamad’s signature policy is to promote religious freedom and coexistence across the globe, claiming that Bahrain is tolerant of all faiths, although this sits uncomfortably with Bahrain’s reputation for being prejudiced against its Shia. In personality terms, the king is judged by diplomats to be a hesitant, vacillating decisionmaker who seeks to avoid confrontation. His eldest son, Crown Prince Salman, who also serves as first deputy prime minister, is still recovering from the ire that some royal family



members directed at him over his proposed concessions to Shia groups during a violent period in 2011, part of the so-called Arab Spring that swept the Middle East. In contrast, Sheikh Khalifa, whose onetime reputation as the “godfather” of hardliners in the wider royal family has now faded, is seen as having cross-sectarian ties and considerable “people” skills.

## Background

Bahrain literally means “two seas,” and consists of a main island and some thirty smaller islands. Its challenges are both geographical and historical. Linked to the Saudi coast by a sixteen-mile-long causeway, Bahrain is the smallest in land area of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. A consequence is that Bahrain’s closest relationship is with Riyadh. Central to the Saudi government view is a concern that Shia discontent in Bahrain could feed into tensions in its Eastern Province, where most of Saudi Arabia’s oil is found and where its Shia are a local majority. An additional uncomfortable fact is that Bahrain lies in the center of the southern Gulf, 110 miles from Iran, which once controlled it. To the irritation of Bahrain, Iranian politicians occasionally suggest the link should be reestablished. (In 1970, a United Nations survey concluded that the majority

of Bahrainis wanted full independence, a conclusion endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 278.<sup>2</sup> Following this, the shah of Iran abandoned the claim on the area.)

Bahrain's economy was based on pearling until oil was discovered, but conventional reserves were always modest and are now almost depleted. A recent find of shale oil offshore may boost the island state's fortunes if a viable way of extracting it can be developed. Bahrain's onetime significant financial sector has long been overtaken by Dubai. Moreover, the state has a ship repair dry dock and an aluminum smeltery, but the economy's foundation remains oil, relying on a 50 percent share in the Saudi offshore Abu Safa oil field.

## History

The ruling al-Khalifa family dates its prominence in the Gulf area to about 1675, when, along with others, members left central Arabia and settled first in the Qatar Peninsula and then in Kuwait. From there, they returned to the Qatar Peninsula in 1762 and established a port and pearling center on the northwest coast at al-Zubarah. From 1753, Bahrain had been under the control of Persia (the former name for Iran). In 1783, the governor of Bahrain attacked the al-Khalifa family in al-Zubarah, but his forces were defeated, and he retreated to Bushehr on the Iranian mainland, leaving Bahrain undefended. In his absence, the island was seized by Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Khalifa, known as Ahmad al-Fatih, the conqueror.<sup>3</sup>

The early 1800s were marked by intrafamily rivalries and tensions with tribes in the areas of what are now Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Muhammad bin Khalifa al-Khalifa was the longest-serving ruler of this era, in power in Bahrain from 1834 to 1868. His position was helped by an 1861 treaty signed with Britain by which he agreed to cease warlike activities in the Qatar Peninsula and elsewhere in exchange for protection against seaborne invasion by rival tribes. This worked well enough until 1868, when, along with Zayed the First of Abu Dhabi, he attacked the town of Doha, now

Qatar's capital. As a punishment, the British political agent in Bahrain, who had plenipotentiary powers, removed Muhammad from power and replaced him with his brother Ali. Within a year, Ali was killed in a battle against forces of Muhammad. The British intervened and appointed Isa, Ali's second son, as ruler, who was also the consensus choice of tribal elders. Significantly, Ali's eldest son, Khaled, was not chosen.

Isa ruled for more than fifty years, a period noted initially for peace and relative prosperity, but his administration became increasingly weak. Other members of the al-Khalifa family misused their power and oppressed the Shia inhabitants. As a consequence, the British eventually removed Isa in 1923 and replaced him with his son Hamad, who used the title of deputy ruler until Isa's death in 1932, when he became the ruler. Isa is said to have preferred his younger son Abdullah to succeed him but was blocked by the British.

## Primogeniture

Hamad's elder brother, Salman, had died in 1898—he fell victim to the plague while returning from pilgrimage. So Hamad was the oldest surviving son rather than his father's first male offspring. Nevertheless, Hamad's accession is seen as establishing the principle of primogeniture in Bahraini succession. Just how well the principle is established is now a key question. When Isa bin Salman, father of the current king, who took power in 1961, died in 1999, there was speculation that his eldest son, Hamad, would not replace him and that instead Isa's brother Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa would seize the opportunity because of Hamad's reputation for being weak. But perhaps because then U.S. secretary of defense William Cohen was on the island visiting when Isa suddenly expired, this did not happen. Today's heir apparent, Crown Prince Salman, age fifty, is presumed to be the next king, but a rising star is his younger half-brother, Nasser bin Hamad, a thirty-one-year-old major-general and commander of the Royal Guard, who accompanies his father on foreign trips and in October 2019 was appointed to serve as national security advisor.

## The Khawalids

Literally “the descendants of Khaled,” the Khawalids are the direct relatives of Khaled, the elder brother of Emir Isa bin Ali, whose claim to be ruler was ignored by the British agent in 1923 because of the harshness Khaled and his sons displayed toward Shia villagers. Put on trial for murder in 1926, Khaled was punished by confinement to the capital, Manama. His sons were sent into exile for several years. Until 1957, the Khawalids were blocked from government positions by the long-serving British agent, Charles Belgrave. Emir Isa rehabilitated the clan, arranging for Khalifa bin Ahmad, a great-grandson to Khaled, to attend boarding school in Britain with his own son, Hamad. Since 1999, under the rule of Hamad bin Isa, now King Hamad, the Khawalids have become increasingly powerful. The term is now synonymous with being a hardliner, but this can be misleading given that some Khawalids are moderate or not involved in royal family politics.

## The Gap the Prime Minister Will Leave

Anecdotally, Sheikh Khalifa is said to want to remain prime minister until he dies so that the newspapers the next day can carry the headline “The Prime Minister Is Dead” rather than “The Former Prime Minister Is Dead.” He is the world’s longest-serving prime minister, having been appointed in 1971. He started in government service as a translator in 1952, and he has always been regarded as clever, cunning, and conservative. Reputedly very wealthy, he has major local business interests in hotels, tourism, and the media, now mainly held in the names of his sons, including Ali bin Khalifa, who is also one of the country’s five deputy prime ministers. His overseas business interests are located predominantly in Asia, particularly Thailand, which he frequently visits. His health is thought to be a growing issue—he no longer chairs the weekly cabinet meeting, yet periodic official news stories about hospital stays or health checkups are always reassuring in tone. In November 2019, he traveled abroad, apparently to Germany, for more medical tests.

Sheikh Khalifa’s reputation reflects the role he has played under his brother Emir Isa (1961–99) and his

## RULERS AND REIGNS

Isa bin Ali <i>(power transferred to his son Hamad in 1923)</i>	1869–1932
Hamad bin Isa	1932–1942
Salman bin Hamad	1942–1961
Isa bin Salman <i>(died of sudden heart attack)</i>	1961–1999
Hamad bin Isa	1999–

## PROMINENT KHAWALIDS

Khaled bin Ahmad bin Salman, 77, minister for the royal court

Khalifa bin Ahmad bin Salman, 73, commander-in-chief, Bahrain Defense Force, the “field marshal”

Abdulaziz bin Atiyatallah, 74, security advisor to the prime minister

Ahmad bin Atiyatallah, 53, minister of follow-up in the royal court

Muhammad bin Khalifa, 44, minister of oil, son of the “field marshal”

*Khaled and Khalifa are brothers, as are Abdulaziz and Ahmad. The bin Atiyatallahs are related by marriage to the Khawalids. Royal Court Minister Khaled bin Ahmad bin Salman al-Khalifa should not be confused with Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Khalifa.*

nephew Emir, now King, Hamad (1999– ). Both have been happy to delegate the day-to-day business of government to the prime minister, at least until 2002, when Hamad appointed his son, Crown Prince Salman, to head the country’s Economic Development Board, tasked with long-term planning. Salman is seen as a political liberal and a driver of economic reform. Despite

setbacks on the political front in his contacts with Shia leaders, Salman's position has grown since he was made first deputy prime minister in 2013. King Hamad delegates duties to Salman at crucial moments, such as showing solidarity by having him sit alongside Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman at the 2018 Riyadh "Davos in the Desert" investment conference a few weeks after the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Another example was having him chair the 2019 "Peace to Prosperity" workshop in Manama, where ideas were exchanged on economic strategies to enhance Israeli-Palestinian peace.

### *Who Will Be the Next Prime Minister?*

Whatever circumstances lead to Sheikh Khalifa's last day as prime minister, Crown Prince Salman may be unable, because of Khawalid opposition, to take over the role, despite his current title of first deputy prime minister. Or he may take the prime minister title in name but leave the day-to-day governing to a new first deputy prime minister, for which there are several possible candidates:

- Muhammad bin Mubarak al-Khalifa, eighty-two, a deputy prime minister and former long-serving foreign minister
- Khaled bin Abdullah al-Khalifa, seventy-six, a deputy prime minister, married to a sister of the late Emir Isa and Sheikh Khalifa
- Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa, sixty-six, the interior minister, very close to the king (his son, Abdullah bin Rashid, is Bahrain's ambassador to the United States)

Such candidates are considered to be only interim replacements for Sheikh Khalifa. The fact that all are al-Khalifa reflects the continuing predominance of the family in government. There are ten al-Khalifa members of the current cabinet—prime minister, deputy prime ministers, and the portfolios of finance, foreign affairs, interior, justice, royal court, and royal court follow-up. This is a greater proportion of royal family members than in any other conservative Arab Gulf state.

### *Others to Watch*

Elsewhere in the Gulf, the emergence of Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani in Qatar, who is thirty-nine, and the thirty-four-year-old crown prince Muhammad bin Salman as the effective leader of Saudi Arabia, has led to considerable speculation that King Hamad may want to take the opportunity to promote one of his younger sons. The focus is on King Hamad's son Nasser and to a lesser extent on Nasser's full brother, Khaled:

- Nasser bin Hamad, thirty-one, commander of the Royal Guard, also national security advisor since October 2019
- Khaled bin Hamad, twenty-nine, commander of the Rapid Intervention Force of the Royal Guard

Both men are avid athletes, having competed in triathlons. Until Nasser's appointment as national security advisor, he noticeably had no political role but is clearly a favorite of his father. Both sons had apparently political marriages. Nasser married a daughter of Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai. In 2011, Khaled married the youngest daughter of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, although they divorced in 2015, after King Salman took over.

Two of their nephews, sons of Crown Prince Salman, also have military experience:

- Isa bin Salman, twenty-nine, captain in the Bahrain navy, previously also served on ships of the British Royal Navy
- Muhammad bin Salman, twenty-eight, tank commander in Bahrain Defense Force, yet to be promoted to a senior position
- In addition: Sheikh Khalifa's own principal sons, not expected to play any significant future role
- Ali bin Khalifa, a deputy prime minister since 2006, described as not very active (his son Khalifa runs the country's Southern Governorate)
- Salman bin Khalifa, aide to his father, cabinet advisor since 2014

## *Implications for U.S. Policy*

Washington is interested in Bahrain's stability not only generally but also specifically because the island hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and provides port facilities to its ships. An estimated ten thousand U.S. service personnel are living in Bahrain at any one time. The Fifth Fleet keeps a low profile, and its presence is largely uncontroversial, except with some political extremists, because of the economic and employment benefits it offers to the general population. This policy proved its worth in the months after the disturbances of 2011 that originally included some Sunni activists but that rapidly turned into major Shia demonstrations and confrontations with security forces.<sup>4</sup> There were no reported attacks on Americans or U.S. installations, and the trouble quieted down after reinforcements of UAE police and Saudi national guard units arrived. Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa's role at the time was seen as using Khawalid backing to assert a toughness that resulted in a decisive outcome.

Under the terms of a bilateral 1991 defense cooperation agreement, the Bahraini government is very permissive in allowing U.S. naval and air movements. So the U.S. Navy is happy to stay there, although the prospect of even tangential involvement in a confrontation between Bahrain and Iran is highly undesirable. During the Obama administration, human rights concerns dominated Manama's relations with Washington. In 2014, the visiting assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor, Tom Malinowski, was expelled for meeting with opposition leaders. The atmosphere has improved, but concerns have persisted about the banning of Shia political groups and the large number of Shia held in detention. U.S. officials often still consider that tensions with the Shia community could be addressed by more subtle Bahraini government actions. For the moment, Washington's bet on Bahrain's future is very much on Crown Prince Salman. When he visited the United States in September 2019, he met President Trump in the Oval Office and had lunch with Vice President Pence. There were additional meetings with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of

Defense Mark Esper, as well as with CIA director Gina Haspel. The United States appears to hope that the crown prince's concentration of economic development and the need to include, rather than marginalize, the Shia community is a winning combination. Whether this approach will prompt blocking moves from the Khawalids is not clear.

## *Implications for Links with Iran*

Bahrain, like Saudi Arabia, broke off diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016, after the Saudi embassy in Tehran was ransacked following the execution of a Saudi Shia cleric. The result has been the end of direct flights and trading links—business essentially lost to the neighboring United Arab Emirates, which only downgraded ties rather than breaking them off. Bahraini Shia wishing to visit shrines in Iran now travel via Dubai or Iraq. Sheikh Khalifa is viewed as being on the harder end of al-Khalifa thinking on Iran, perhaps tempered by concern at the commercial opportunities lost and the competitive advantage slipping to Gulf neighbors. Although demonstrations in 2011 were prompted by indigenous tensions, Iran encouraged the activists. In 2015, a bomb-making factory and arms caches linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps were discovered, and in 2017 an oil pipeline was blown up.<sup>5</sup> In contrast with its activities in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, Iran's mischief in Bahrain—support and training for Shia militant activists and hostile broadcasting—is regarded as being now comparatively low key. Despite earlier perceptions of him as political hardliner, Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa now appears to have mellowed, recently showing a conciliatory side. In 2019, he visited the local senior Shia cleric Abdullah al-Ghuraifi, who has worked to ease tensions in the absence of the religious leader of Bahrain's Shia, Isa Qassim, who is in exile in Iran, and the political leader, Ali Salman, who is in prison. After Sheikh Khalifa's departure, Tehran may review its options, especially if hints emerge of substantial tensions within the al-Khalifa ruling family.

## Implications for Gulf Relations

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been large and important contributors of development aid to Bahrain, with Abu Dhabi in particular noted for trying to ensure that both the Sunni and Shia communities benefit. Despite these ties, in 2019 Sheikh Khalifa sent Ramadan greetings to Emir Tamim of Qatar, whose country has been subjected to a blockade by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain itself since 2017. The call to Doha was explained by Manama as being merely social without political meaning but was nevertheless interpreted widely as showing Sheikh Khalifa's disapproval of Qatar's continuing isolation. On Qatar, Manama has followed almost slavishly the lead of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. According to diplomats, Manama was bounced into the blockade, given less than twenty-four hours to agree to its larger neighbors' decision, even though only weeks before Bahrain had approached Qatar for a loan.<sup>6</sup> With the November 2019 announcement that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar will send soccer teams to Doha for the Arabian Gulf Cup, the rift is clearly weakening, if not ending.

## Implications for Contacts with Israel

Sheikh Khalifa is not viewed as an enthusiastic supporter of closer ties with Israel, as other members of the royal family are, but neither has he been seen as trying

to block them. Once private, even clandestine, these contacts are now almost commonplace. In 2017, King Hamad's son Nasser spoke at an event at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, where the Bahraini police band played the U.S. and Bahraini national anthems, and there was also spirited singing of the Israeli national anthem, "Hatikvah." Later that year, a Bahraini interfaith delegation visited Jerusalem, although this caused political outrage back home, and the group had to be reassured by the king before returning to Bahrain that its visit had been approved. The attendance of Israeli business executives and journalists at the mid-2019 U.S.-sponsored peace workshop in Manama was followed by an Israeli diplomat openly taking part in a maritime security meeting. Yet formal diplomatic relations appear elusive and likely first require a significant step from another Gulf country, principally Saudi Arabia.

Sheikh Khalifa's departure from the political scene will leave just two elderly Gulf leaders active in regional politics—ninety-year-old Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah of Kuwait and seventy-nine-year-old Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said of Oman, who celebrates his fiftieth year in power in 2020. (Neither eighty-three-year-old King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia nor UAE president Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan plays any significant role in politics any longer.) A historical era will be ending in which Sheikh Khalifa will have had a major role despite never having had the title of emir or king.

## Notes

1. Central Intelligence Agency, "Middle East: Bahrain," The World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html>.
2. See the resolution at [https://undocs.org/S/RES/278\(1970\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/278(1970)).
3. Bahrain challenged Qatar to the ownership of al-Zubarah in a legal case settled by the International Court of Justice in 2001. Qatar retained ownership but conceded the Hawar Islands to Bahraini sovereignty.
4. See Simon Henderson, "Bahrain's Crisis: Saudi Forces Intervene," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 1777, March 15, 2011, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/bahrain-crisis-saudi-forces-intervene>.
5. Simon Henderson, "Bahrain Pipeline Explosion Seen as a Warning from Iran," Policy Alert, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 14, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/bahrain-pipeline-explosion-seen-as-a-warning-from-iran>.
6. See, e.g., Simon Henderson, "A Field Trip to the Front Lines of the Qatar-Saudi Cold War," *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2017, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-field-trip-to-the-front-lines-of-the-qatar-saudi-cold-war>.

## About the Author

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