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All in the Family: Leadership Changes in the Gulf

Yoel Guzansky and Eran Segal

The hospitalization in July of the world's oldest leaders, King Salman bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia, 84 years old, and Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, the 91-year-old Emir of Kuwait, has rekindled fears regarding the stability of the six Arab monarchies in the Gulf. These monarchies are ruled by extended families that control most of the centers of power in their countries. As long as these families succeeded in cultivating consensus among their different branches, this centralized power has, over the years, contributed to the relative stability of the monarchies. However, struggles within the ruling families, especially regarding monarchical succession, constitute a weak point with the potential to endanger regime stability, particularly when the family in question is a large one. In some countries, the designated heir is not young or is not healthy, which could shorten the duration of his rule and spark an ongoing struggle over succession. In any event, in addition to the fear of Iranian aggression, the rise of a younger generation of leaders in the Gulf states appears to explain their policies, which are more assertive than traditional policies, and include an increasing openness and willingness to cooperate with Israel.

Recent changes in leadership in the Gulf began in early 2020 in Oman, with the death of Qaboos bin Said, who shaped the sultanate in his image. Qaboos's cousin Haitham bin Tariq, who is 65 and served as the country's Minister of Heritage and Culture, was appointed to succeed him. Thus far, Haitham appears to enjoy the support of his family, but his appointment began at a particularly challenging time, coming on the eve of two major crises, the drop in oil prices and the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a series of decisions of August 2020, Haitham turned Oman in practice into a family monarchy comparable to its neighbors. For the first time in the history of modern Oman, the sultan relinquished his position as Minister of Foreign Affairs when he appointed the director-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Badr al Busaidi, as minister, replacing veteran minister bin Alawi, who had served in the position since 1997. He also appointed a new economic minister, as well as his brother Shihab to the position of deputy Minister of Defense and his son Dhi Yazan as Minister of Culture, Sports, and Youth. Before Qaboos's death, there were reports on more than one occasion of arrests of agents of the

United Arab Emirates, which may have sought to influence the selection of his replacement in order to bring the country closer to their positions, especially vis-à-vis Iran.

In Kuwait, Emir Sabah al-Ahmad has been in power since 2006. From the beginning of the century until his rise to power, rule was shared by two branches of the al-Sabah family. Upon assuming power, Sabah managed to remove the competing branch from senior positions and from the line of succession, and to appoint his half-brother Nawaf al-Ahmad (83) as crown prince. Nawaf served as the Kuwaiti Minister of Defense in 1990, and the country's occupation by Iraq had a detrimental impact on his standing. His appointment is considered to be a compromise that will allow the rise of a younger generation from within the branch. Nonetheless, it appears that it was actually Emir Sabah's power and the widespread support he has enjoyed over the past decade that served to curb the influence of younger figures. Although it is estimated that Nawaf al-Ahmad will be appointed Emir after Sabah's death, the appointment of a crown prince, and therefore the determination of the order of succession, could arouse a widespread struggle among the younger generation, which could undermine the stability of the royal family and the state.

Although Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan is the President of the United Arab Emirates, his half-brother, Muhammad bin Zayed (59), the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, is the de facto ruler of the federation due to his brother's illness, which is expected to prevent his return to political life. Alongside bin Zayed are his brothers who hold key positions: Sheikh Abdullah (48) has served as Minister of Foreign Affairs since 2006; Sheikh Tahnoun (52) has served as the National Security Advisor since 2015; and Sheikh Mansour (50) has served as deputy Prime Minister since 2009. Mansour benefited from his 2005 marriage to the daughter of the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, who has not always welcomed bin Zayed's marked assertiveness. Mansour and his brothers are the most prominent candidates to succeed him in power.

In Bahrain, 70-year-old King Hamad bin Isa has been in power since his father's death in 1999. According to Bahrain's constitution (1973), the crown prince must be the son of the ruler. Hamad's oldest son, Salman, 50, is now the crown prince, although his status is problematic. In recent years, his younger sons, Nasser and Khalid, have been promoted to important positions, which may enable a change of crown prince in accordance with the terms of the constitution. In the meantime, the king's uncle Khalifa (84), who enjoys the most political and economic power in the country, was appointed to serve as Prime Minister in 1971, when Bahrain gained independence. He is the longest-serving prime minister in the world today, but neither he nor his descendants are eligible to gain supreme control, although sons Ali and Salman hold key positions.

Tamim bin Hamad, Emir of Qatar (in power since 2013), is one of the most stable rulers in the Gulf. Since the country's establishment, power has passed down from father to son, typically through ousting. However, Hamad, Tamim's oldest son, is not yet 12. Tamim's grandfather Khalifa ousted his cousin Ahmad (who himself ousted his father Ali), and the heirs of the branch regard themselves as eligible to rule. One, Abdullah bin Ali (63), also tried, again with Saudi support, to oust Tamim in light of the crisis between the countries that erupted in 2017. In addition, Salman bin Suhaim, son of the Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs (in the 1980s), who regarded himself as a candidate to inherit rule, also tried to take action with Saudi support. At this point, it appears that they enjoy little support and that Tamim's popularity has not been hurt, and has even increased in light of the embargo against Qatar.

When King Salman of Saudi Arabia passes away it will not be a sudden event, as the kingdom has been preparing for the day when its seventh and last king among the sons of the kingdom's founder, Ibn Saud, will die. In the meantime, there are pockets of opposition in the family to the rule of his son, Mohammed bin Salman, who is currently the de facto ruler of the country and seeks to quash this opposition. Thus far, King Salman's legitimacy enjoyed has sheltered the crown prince from the possible implications of controversial measures in the domestic and the international arenas, and thus some of those who do not dare to oppose him will wait to do so until he assumes power. Mohammed bin Salman can be expected to remain in power, flanked by two brothers whom he appointed to key positions: Abdulaziz (Minister of Energy) and Khalid (deputy Minister of Defense). The latter could be appointed crown prince upon the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as king or serve as an alternative that is acceptable to the Allegiance Council if and when disagreement arises to bin Salman's accession to the throne.

Among the monarchies' survival skills is the distribution of key positions to members of the ruling family, but some families have many princes. For example, it is estimated that Saudi Arabia has approximately 5,000 princes, not all of whom enjoy comparable status. The stability of the regime, therefore, depends to a great extent on the sense of solidarity among them. Broad agreement regarding the future order of succession enhances stability, just as disagreement can spark tension and endanger the family. Despite the dominance of the different rulers, family constitutes the regimes' primary source of legitimacy, and their dependence on it, even if it is not always felt, dictates the decision making processes.

Still, the royal family's broad participation in governance has some failings: a ruler who is not satisfied with the performance of family members in key positions cannot always

dismiss them or transfer them to different positions. Indeed, in order to remove the Saudi deputy Minister of Defense, Mohammed bin Salman will need to dismiss his brother, and in Oman the Sultan will need to dismiss his brother in order to appoint a Minister of Defense to replace him. Dismissing an official from a position under such circumstances sends shockwaves through the royal family and the country.

The identity of the future Arab leaders has always been a focus of interest for other countries, near and far. In the Gulf today, the rise of a younger generation that is relatively free of the shackles of the past could have an impact on the monarchies themselves. The younger generation constitutes a majority of the population of the Gulf states, and they harbor expectations of expanding involvement in decisions regarding the future of these countries. That is not to say that young leaders will necessarily open up the political system to the involvement of their citizens, as even the civilian population still largely associates "democratic experimenting" with the bloodshed and destruction brought about by the Arab Spring.

Nonetheless, the expectations of political involvement could increase social tensions, and in order to ease them, the leaders could institute reforms, even if only symbolic and limited. The rise of a new generation of leaders in the Gulf can help explain the increasing openness to Israel, which reflects shared concerns regarding the regional aspirations of Iran. This openness, which has been notable in recent years, has also included a willingness to cooperate with Israel, including publicly, as exhibited in the agreements reached recently by Israel and the United Arab Emirates. By strengthening their ties with Israel, these countries will be contributing to the growth of a leadership that will encourage dynamics of change in the Middle East. At the same time, failure in this endeavor could spark a reaction in the conservative countries of the Gulf.

* Eran Segal is a fellow at the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, Haifa University.