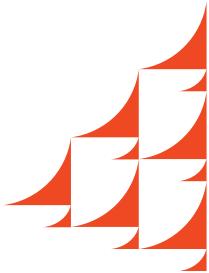


The Arab Gulf States  
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New Generation Royals and Succession Dynamics in  
the Gulf States

Kristin Smith Diwan



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## New Generation Royals and Succession Dynamics in the Gulf States

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## About the Author

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## Executive Summary

As Gulf monarchies face a generational transition in leadership, new challenges are emerging. The intensified royal competition comes amid dramatically transformed information environments; societies that are better educated and more engaged in public affairs; and an unstable regional environment that invites intervention. These forces are disrupting the continuity of long-standing norms that regulate ruling family interaction, and testing the assumption that royal competition supports political stability.

This paper examines these contemporary dynamics – new generation competition, the populist temptation, foreign patrons, and the new information environment – illustrating their impact on the ruling houses of the Gulf Arab countries. While drawing upon examples from across the Gulf Cooperation Council states, this study focuses on the two countries where the competition for leadership of the next generation is most intense: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

After presenting the formal laws and informal rules that have regulated ruling family interaction and succession, the paper looks at how the transition away from the founders' generation of royals is unleashing new antagonisms and ambitions. The three countries that made that transition in the 1990s – the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain – experienced significant changes in direction, as young royals sought to leave their marks on the direction of both government and foreign policy. The two dynastic monarchies that have not yet made this transition are experiencing intensified competition over the leadership of the next generation. The passage from brothers and cousins in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to their sons and nephews means a natural culling of ruling lines: a decisive contraction of the ruling elite with stark implications for future material and power prospects. The resulting rivalries are pushing royal contenders to look beyond family coalitions, to social constituencies and external allies, to buttress their claims to the throne.

The alignment of rival princes with social constituencies can provide an avenue for greater public engagement in monarchies. But it can also exacerbate social divisions: sectarianism in Bahrain and Kuwait; urban and tribal divisions in Kuwait; and liberal-Islamist divisions in Saudi Arabia. Royal alignments across the Gulf may also strengthen state ties, such as the close relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, but may backfire if allies are perceived to be choosing sides in a factional battle. Saudi-Qatari relations suffered in the past, and Saudi-Emirati relations could suffer under a Saudi Arabia led by Mohammed bin Nayef al-Saud, the crown prince.

The danger for ruling families reaching beyond the royal house is magnified in an information environment where leaks, intentional or not, can be shared widely. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have seen royal dissidents bring charges against rivals to public light through traditional and social media. Princes further removed from power – a more common occurrence as royal houses multiply in size – may also be tempted to use publicity to sue for a better position within the ruling family. All of these actions challenge the projection of royal unity and, if taken too far, can diminish the deference shown by the public to the royal family.

Thus far, royal competition has not led to violent struggles for power or permanent dangerous rifts, suggesting that the traditional model of “bandwagoning” with the winner still holds. Nonetheless, the struggle for next generation leadership, even if ultimately resolved, may breed instability in the interim. Kuwait’s parliamentary dysfunction, Bahrain’s failed strategies toward the Shia opposition, Saudi Arabia’s assertive intervention in Yemen and aggressive efforts to reform the kingdom’s economy have at least some roots in factional competition. Increasingly, both Gulf citizens and Gulf allies may need to adjust their expectations and calculations as competing strategies and sometimes ideologies weaken the notion of a unitary leadership.

## Introduction

Competition is a fact of life within monarchies, regulated through informal rules and, in some cases, more formal laws and institutions. Academic studies have portrayed such competition as natural and even beneficial to regime stability.<sup>1</sup> While royals may jockey for advantage behind the scenes, ultimately internal family cohesion prevails due to the overwhelming imperative to avoid losing power. To safeguard the monarchy, royal family members will eventually “bandwagon” or join the coalition of the most powerful royal contender. And to secure royal support, successful monarchs will generously pay consolation prizes to rivals in the form of material payouts and government positions, strengthening the bonds of dynastic monarchy.

However, new dynamics have emerged over the past decade that call into question the assumption that royal competition supports stability. The passage of the founders’ generation that ushered the monarchies into statehood comes with an understandable fall in royal prestige. More practically, the transition to the new generation of royals is fraught as growing ruling families inevitably cull lines from consideration for future rule, and younger royals battle for pre-eminence. Moreover, this difficult transition comes at a time when rapidly maturing societies tempt royals to court popular support for their candidacy, and the revolution in information technology makes it more difficult to keep royal rivalries out of the public eye. The power of monarchs to unilaterally shape the political direction and foreign policy of the state also invites foreign intervention by concerned neighbors eager to tip the balance toward their favored candidate.

This paper will examine the key factors impacting factional competition and royal succession today – new generation competition; the populist temptation; foreign patrons; and the new information environment – illustrating these dynamics with experiences drawn from Gulf Arab states. It concludes that, while the imperative to bandwagon behind the winning faction still holds, these new factors mean that competitive dynamics within ruling families have the potential to generate considerable instability if not well managed.

## Succession in Dynastic Monarchies

Political succession in the Gulf monarchies follows certain formal and, especially, informal rules. Except for Bahrain, Gulf states do not rely on primogeniture; future rulers must be determined among multiple contenders, with high stakes involved in the outcome. While historically Gulf emirates witnessed violent struggles for power, in the modern era, consultation and coalition building has prevailed, as royal families have shared in rule over an expanded state apparatus.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Herb has written the definitive book on the origins and internal dynamics of dynastic monarchies, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999). Other important book-length works include: Russell E. Lucas, *The Politics of Arab Monarchies: Legacy, Survival and Reform* (London: Routledge, 2010); Sean L. Yom, *From Resilience to Revolution: How Foreign Interventions Destabilize the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Joseph A. Kechichian, *Power and Succession in Arab Monarchies: A Reference Guide* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2008).

Today ruler-ship in the Gulf Arab states is determined by a process of royal consensus from within a circumscribed group of eligible descendants of an eponymous ancestor. In most cases, the lineage of the ruling circle is defined by existing constitutions and basic laws.<sup>2</sup>

Unique among Gulf states, Bahrain has a constitutional requirement of primogeniture. In the early 20th century, the British were more deeply involved in Bahrain than in other Gulf states, intervening not only in the development of state institutions, but also in the process of royal succession. The precedent they set of having the eldest son succeed his father was later enshrined in Bahrain's 1973 and 2002 constitutions. The Qatari constitution, drafted under the rule of the previous Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and adopted in 2004, proclaims that rule shall be hereditary within the Al Thani family. It further states that succession shall flow through the male descendants of Emir Hamad himself: the particular son chosen at the emir's discretion. Kuwait's 1962 constitution restricts the right to rule to the descendants of the emirate's founder, Mubarak al-Sabah, which for many years led to an informal arrangement of alternating power between the descendants of two of Mubarak's sons, Salem and Jaber. Saudi Arabia's basic law passed in 1992 stipulates that rulers be drawn from the sons of the founder of the kingdom, King Abdulaziz al-Saud, and "the sons of sons." Oman's 1996

Basic Law entrusts an institution, the Ruling Family Council, with the nomination of a male descendent of Sayyid Turki bin Said bin Sultan. Yet this process is made more uncertain by the absence of family influence over Sultan Qaboos bin Said – uncharacteristic for Gulf states – and by the nonexistence of a direct male heir. The United Arab Emirates' 1996 constitution leaves it to each of the seven emirates to provide their own rules for succession, with the seven emirs then forming a ruling Supreme Council. The chairman of the Supreme Council and president of the UAE have customarily come from the wealthiest and most powerful emirate, Abu Dhabi.

*Saudi Arabia's basic law passed in 1992 stipulates that rulers be drawn from the sons of the founder of the kingdom, King Abdulaziz al-Saud, and "the sons of sons."*

Those branches and individuals eligible for rule as defined by Gulf constitutions and basic laws form what Abdulhadi Khalaf has described as "the ruling core": an unchallenged ruler in Oman, a coalition of rulers in the UAE, cousins in Kuwait, brothers in Saudi Arabia, and the ruler and his sons in Bahrain and Qatar.<sup>3</sup> Selection of future rulers from within this ruling core relies upon informal practices defined by certain traditional norms.<sup>4</sup> Age is strongly respected, and this seniority sets precedence, and demands deference, within ruling families. Ability, measured both in fitness to serve in leadership positions and success in building a supportive familial coalition, counts toward selection of the "best" candidate. Once receiving the *baya* (allegiance) of the most powerful members of the ruling family, the authority of the king is respected. And there is a commitment to resolve disputes within the framework of the family.

<sup>2</sup> The particular constitutional rules on royal succession are delineated in Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Rules of Succession and Political Participation in the GCC States," in *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf* eds. Abdulhadi Khalaf and Giacomo Luciani (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2006): 33-50.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>4</sup> Herb analyzes these norms drawing upon a discussion by a prominent Saudi prince, Khalid bin Sultan, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999): 31-36.

While these informal rules and practices have served the Gulf Arab monarchies well since independence and the arrival of oil wealth, they are now under increasing strain. Both the composition of the “ruling core” and the norms for choosing specific leaders are being transformed due to new generational dynamics and the societal changes accompanying them.

## New Generation Competition

In the centralized power structure of Gulf monarchies, changes in leadership can have substantial impact on the direction of government. The transition of power from the founder’s generation of state builders to their sons and nephews has proved to be momentous, as new generation monarchs have been eager to leave their mark. Their tenures share a characteristic technocratic impulse to improve efficiency in governance and to strengthen national autonomy.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain witnessed sharp changes in policies and ambitious new agendas after sons replaced their fathers.

The UAE made the generational transition during the long convalescence of the founding father, Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, who passed away in 2004. While his son, Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, formally holds power as president of the UAE and emir of Abu Dhabi, Khalifa’s younger brother, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, exercises the real initiative in UAE policymaking, in consultation with the ruler of Dubai who serves as the vice president of the federation. Crown Prince Mohammed, true to next generation leaders, has set the country on a path of modernization, economic diversification, and regional ambition. His signature pursuit has been a strong national project: to unify the emirates under the centralizing power of Abu Dhabi and to expand the strategic reach of the UAE economically and militarily. The United States and Saudi Arabia rely upon the UAE and its well-trained special forces in counterterrorism operations and military campaigns such as the war in Yemen.

Upon unseating his father in 1995, Qatar’s former Emir Hamad likewise introduced ambitious policies of domestic and regional transformation. He hastened the development of natural gas production, using the windfall to usher in dramatic social change to the sleepy and conservative emirate. Comprehensive educational reforms and the inauguration of foreign universities brought a new outlook within, while Qatar expanded its global reach through a distinctive combination of media and diplomacy. Qatar’s surprising support for youth-led revolts across the Arab world through blanket coverage by its satellite channel Al Jazeera marked first the apex, and then the nadir, of Emir Hamad’s influence. He finished his reign with the unprecedented act of stepping down from office in favor of his son, Prince Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who has been ruling the emirate since 2013.

Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa sharply changed strategy upon his father’s death in 1999. He welcomed the exiled opposition back to the country and initiated a reform process that resulted in the National Action Charter, which produced a new constitution and reinstated the Parliament, albeit in weakened form, in 2002. He then empowered his son to lead a program of economic diversification and institutional reform known as Bahrain Economic Vision 2030.

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<sup>5</sup> Becca Wasser and Jeff Martini, “[The Next Generation of Gulf Leaders: The Kids are Alright](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, February 14, 2016.

The exceptions prove the rule as King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud in Saudi Arabia, until his death in 2015, and Sultan Qaboos pursued much more cautious and incremental reforms. That incrementalism in Saudi Arabia has been abandoned under the reign of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, who has, in effect, gotten an early jump on generational change in the kingdom's leadership by empowering his son to lead both defense and economic policy. Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman al-Saud has followed the pattern of his new generation of Gulf neighbors in seeking to leave his mark through a more assertive foreign posture, and the launch of his own economic transformation program, Saudi Vision 2030.

Kuwait, whose 2006 transition remained within the same ruling generation, saw no such ambitious project of domestic transformation or regional influence, to the bitter frustration of the young population. The generational split was revealed even within the royal family as early as 1992, when 17 young princes published a petition in *al-Zaman*, a magazine owned by Nasser Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, the son of the current emir. The petition expressed frustration with the lack of public confidence in the ruling family, and argued for the need for significant political reforms.<sup>6</sup>

Still, as age pushes rule from the founder's generation toward their sons and nephews, competition intensifies among royal rivals. There are two reasons for this. First, ruling families are growing, intensifying the competition over ministerial posts, governorates, military leadership, sinecures, and resources. Indeed, a recent Chatham House study argues that the impossibility of finding government positions for expanding ruling families has resulted in the opening of a "safety valve": the exodus of increasing numbers of princes into business, an arena once protected from royal intervention.<sup>7</sup>

*...as age pushes rule from the founder's generation toward their sons and nephews, competition intensifies among royal rivals.*

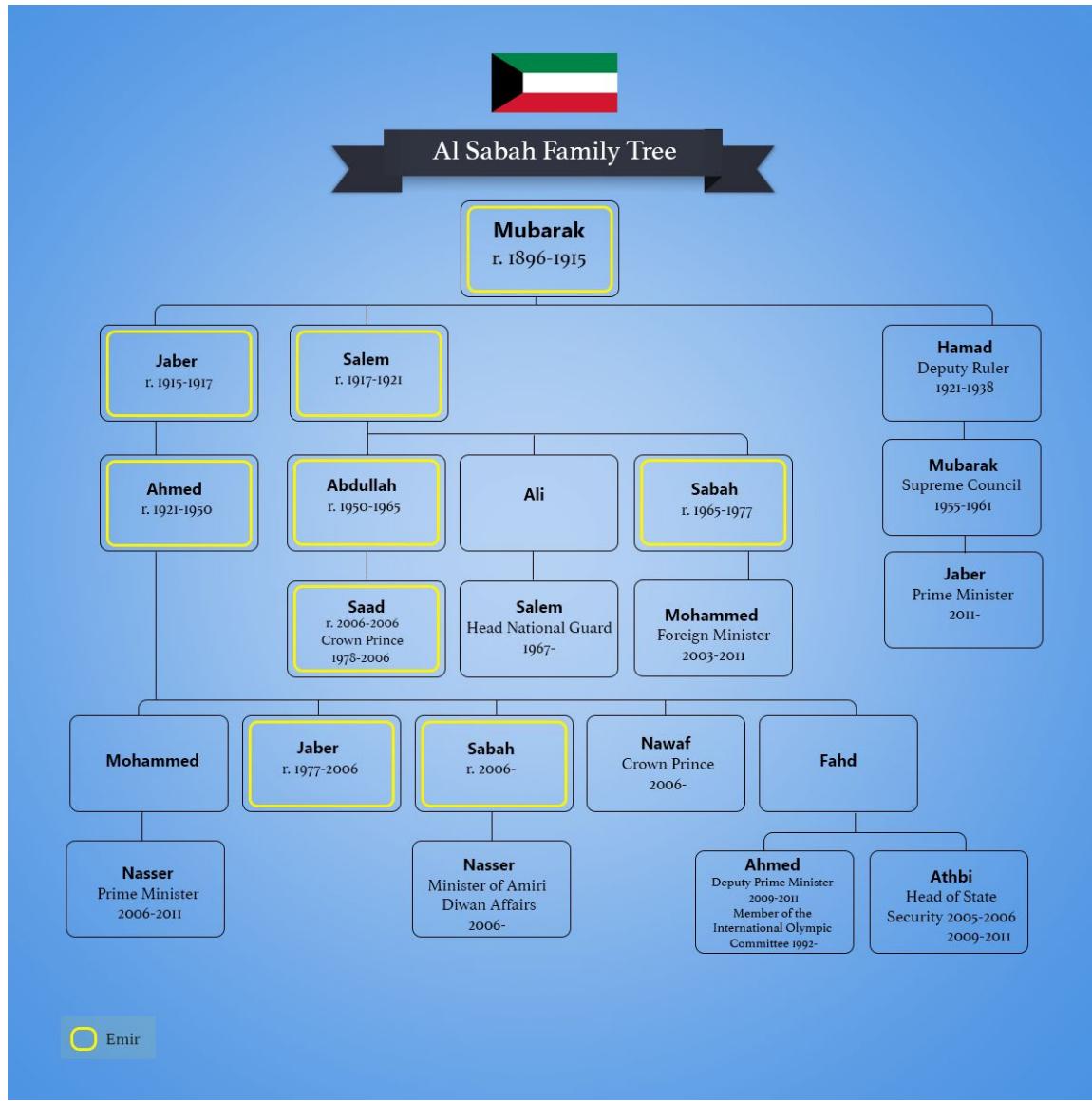
Second, the generational transition results in a natural culling of the ruling branches, with stark implications for the future fortunes of royals. Only very limited lines are in consideration for rule, and the competition among them is fierce. Thus, both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where succession has heretofore passed among brothers and cousins, are presently witnessing remarkably public battles for power among the next generation royals waiting in the wings.

There have been four Kuwaiti emirs since independence in 1961. The last succession in 2006 broke with the powersharing arrangement that had persisted between the Jaber and Salem branches of the ruling Al Sabah family. With few exceptions, these two lines had alternated rule, establishing an informal balance of power. This ended with the death of Emir Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, who had ruled Kuwait for 29 years along with the long-standing crown prince of the Salem line, Saad al-Abdullah al-Sabah. However, both were increasingly infirm at the

<sup>6</sup> For more on the dissident royal petition known as the "wathiqah" see Muhammed al-Rumaihi, "[The Reform Document...and the Renewal of Kuwaiti Political Life](#)," *Al-Jazeera*, October 3, 2004; "Nasser Sabah al-Ahmed Criticizes the Government: The Main Roadblock to Development in Kuwait," *Al-Hayat*, May 1, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Mehran Kamrava, Gerd Nonneman, Anastasia Nosova, and Marc Valeri, "[Ruling Families and Business Elites in the Gulf Monarchies: Ever Closer?](#)" *Chatham House*, November 3, 2016.

end of their rules, providing an opening for the ambitious foreign minister, Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, who was named prime minister in 2003, ending a long practice of having the crown prince serve as the head of government.



With the death of Emir Jaber in 2006, Sabah was able to build a winning coalition of royals and the support of legislators cultivated through his time as prime minister to sideline Saad, who was medically unfit to serve as emir. Seeing the writing on the wall, the senior member of the Salem line and eldest member of the Al Sabah, National Guard Head Salem al-Ali al-Sabah, resisted the shift in power.<sup>8</sup> This allowed the opportunistic Parliament to depose Emir Saad, strengthening its already constitutionally granted role in succession. The new emir quickly named his brother, Nawaf al-Ahmed al-Sabah, as his heir, and his nephew, Nasser

<sup>8</sup> Anticipating the shift in power to the Al Jaber, Salem al-Ali is reported to have proposed a tripartite arrangement of rule, including himself.

al-Mohammed al-Ahmed al-Sabah, as prime minister, completing the sidelining of the Salem line. Most observers believe the Salem line has been eliminated from future rule, although that has not prevented them from playing spoiler.

The weakening of the Salem branch of the ruling family means the real competition for rule has passed to the next generation of the Al Jaber line, to the sons and nephews of the current emir. Thus, the past several years have played witness to a remarkably public rivalry between once leading contenders: two nephews of the emir, the prime minister, Nasser al-Mohammed, and Ahmed al-Fahd al-Sabah. This competition has enlisted, and at times unwittingly ensnared, most of the major power centers within Kuwaiti public and political life: the Parliament, the media, the courts, and even international sports, as the two royals have used all resources at their disposal to undercut their rival.

Succession in Saudi Arabia has been noteworthy for the dominance of the sons of the ruling founder. In the 60-plus years since the death of the founding father and patriarch, King Abdulaziz, the kingdom has been ruled exclusively by his sons. With the long line of progeny finally reaching its end due to old age, the competition has finally passed to the next generation, with extraordinary stakes for winners and losers. King Abdullah sought to delay this inevitability through the creation of the ahistoric position of deputy crown prince and appointing Muqrin bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, the youngest surviving son of King Abdulaziz, to the position. The ascension of King Salman eliminated this delaying tactic. Within months of coming to power he removed Muqrin from the line of succession and appointed as crown prince the most powerful candidate of the next generation, Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, at the same time, appointing his own younger son, Mohammed bin Salman, deputy crown prince.

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The next generation competition was decisively set, then, in the hands of the experienced and internationally well-connected interior minister, and his much younger and ambitious rival, leveraging his privileged position within the royal court. This has generated an implicit rivalry within the government, with the crown prince witnessing the concentration of other power centers in the hands of Mohammed bin Salman, who was appointed both minister of defense and chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs.

The norms of ruling family competition demand that any rivalries be managed within the framework of the ruling family. Yet as the monarchies in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait move toward decisive generational transitions, the temptation of rivals to leverage external resources – in broader society and foreign alliances – can be great. The next two sections examine the attraction of enlisting popular support for a royal candidacy, and of leveraging relations with neighboring monarchs and external powers. Finally, all of this plays out within a radically expanded information environment, which makes it even more difficult to keep things within the family.

## The Populist Temptation

The traditional model of royal succession portrays aspiring rulers as working assiduously to build a royal coalition to support their candidacy. The maintenance of a dynastic monarchy requires intensive internal negotiations and continuous efforts to resolve disputes within the family. While the royal household remains the primary arena for factional competition, the growing maturity of Gulf societies poses a temptation for rivals who seek to leverage popular support in their bids to become national leader.

While such populist appeals exist historically, the use of this tactic is increasing, especially in the parliamentary monarchies where societal input is institutionalized. Yet even where that is not the case, a strategy of supplementing royal standing with popular support can be attractive, especially as a new generation has become more engaged in civic affairs and has found more independent means of expression through social media. Public campaigns can enhance those elite contenders with the weaker hand in royal support. They are also sometimes deployed by more marginal princes seeking to improve their leverage within the family.

Kuwait's tradition of public engagement in politics offers the strongest example of the populist temptation, as well as the toll it can take on public deference to royal authority as well as political stability. Unique among Gulf monarchies, Kuwait's Parliament has a constitutional role in royal succession. The incoming emir's choice of crown prince must be approved by a majority vote held in a special session of the National Assembly. If this approval is denied, the Parliament is empowered to select the successor, again by majority vote, from among three alternatives submitted by the emir.

Such parliamentary approval may provide depth to ruling legitimacy and a public display of national unity for a well-ordered ruling house and a carefully cultivated Parliament. Yet the complications are clear in today's Kuwait, where royal competition for the mantle of next generation leadership is fierce and oppositional currents make the Parliament something much more than a rubber stamp of executive decisions. This volatile mix, accentuated by the region's strongest extra-parliamentary youth mobilization, accounts for much of the instability Kuwait's mixed parliamentary system has experienced in the last decade. Since 2006 there have been seven elections, with no single Parliament serving its full four-year term, each falling into a debilitating cycle of ministerial interpolations and royal or court-ordered dissolutions. The cost to Kuwait's economy has been real, as the once leader of the Gulf littoral has experienced a notable stagnation in infrastructure investment and public services relative to the UAE and Qatar.

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*Unique among Gulf monarchies, Kuwait's Parliament has a constitutional role in royal succession.*

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While the complexity of the sociopolitical changes in post-liberation Kuwait warn against facile analysis, factional competition has been an important element in Kuwait's chronic political instability.<sup>9</sup> The Parliament has proved too tempting an arena to undercut rivals and build support for the future parliamentary backing needed to ascend the throne. The no-holds-barred rivalry between the emir's two nephews – former Prime Minister Nasser al-Mohammed and former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Planning Ahmed al-Fahd – is most evident. Both of these royals have cultivated important social constituencies: Nasser among the Shia community and business elites; and the more populist Ahmed, the son of a war hero killed in the 1990 Iraq invasion, among tribal groups and youth cultivated through his family's long association with international sports.

In 2011, their competition came to a head as both worked through the Parliament to undermine the other. In June, Ahmed al-Fahd was forced to resign his position as deputy prime minister after the parliamentary supporters of the prime minister, Nasser al-Mohammed, and even government officials, withdrew their backing before a vote of no confidence. This unprecedented action prompted the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Qabas to publish a front-page editorial, "Enough Fighting among Sons of the Ruling Family," reminding the Al Sabah of the dangers of using Parliament as an arena for its power struggles.<sup>10</sup> Two months later, documents were leaked implicating the prime minister and his government in doling out monetary payments to up to one-third of standing legislators for their parliamentary support for government initiatives. This political scandal consumed Kuwait for months, feeding a growing movement of youth-led street protests demanding the resignation of the prime minister, which led to his removal in November 2011. The ensuing parliamentary elections completed in February 2012 returned the most oppositional Parliament in Kuwait's history.

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The weakening of the executive in the face of parliamentary opposition and the street protests of 2011 are a clear testament to the dangers to ruling families of mobilizing sociopolitical forces in the service of their royal rivalries. Yet, especially for young royals, the temptation to court societal support for their emerging candidacies is powerful. Such appeals, particularly made to newly empowered youth constituencies, are apparent in the strategies of Bahrain's crown prince, Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, and Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

As stated, Bahrain is unique in having the practice of primogeniture enshrined in its constitution. Still, the reign of King Hamad, and the ascendance of the heir apparent, his eldest son, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, has not been without contestation of their royal prerogative. Both the king and especially the crown prince found their room for maneuver limited by the king's uncle, the long-standing Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa.

<sup>9</sup> For a scholarly account of this royal factionalism see Rivka Azoulay and Claire Beaugrand, "Limits of Political Clientelism: Elites' Struggles in Kuwait Fragmenting Politics," *Arabian Humanities* 4 (2015). Other accounts include Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "[Pushing the Limits: The Changing Rules of Kuwait's Politics](#)," *World Politics Review*, March 17, 2016; and Kristin Smith Diwan, "[Kuwait's Royals are Taking Their Feuds Public](#)," *The Washington Post*, May 8, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Ulf Laessing, "[Kuwait in Crisis as Ruling Family Splits, MPs Rebel](#)," *Reuters*, June 7, 2011.

As head of government for over 45 years, Prime Minister Khalifa has built powerful allies in government and business; constituencies resistant to the economic changes sought by the more technocratic crown prince through the Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 initiative he has championed. The crown prince thus cultivated a younger generation eager to see change and progress to support his program of government reform. His competitive merit-based scholarships to study abroad groomed a highly educated and cross-sectarian cohort eager to return and take up positions in his governmental base of power, such as the extraministerial Economic Development Board. His efforts to reform labor markets and develop Bahrain's small businesses created a platform to integrate disenfranchised Shia, a move that paralleled his father's tentative political outreach.

This strategy collapsed with the failure of political negotiations with the opposition in 2011, leaving the crown prince much weakened politically. In the end, his youth appeal could not overcome the dissatisfaction of significant portions of the Shia community and proved no match for the loyal base of support in tribal families and business elite that sustained the prime minister through the difficult days of the 2011 political unrest, when protesters called for his resignation. The weakening of the crown prince and the intensified security situation have facilitated the rise of alternate power centers within the ruling family, centered in the Defense Ministry and royal court.<sup>11</sup>

Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince has been pursuing a popular strategy with some similarities to that of Bahrain's crown prince. Mohammed bin Salman, too, has championed a technocratic program of governmental reform and economic diversification as chairman of the newly consolidated Council of Economic and Development Affairs. Like Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad had done, he has linked his political fortunes to the success of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan. Still Mohammed bin Salman has a broader power base, including his position as minister of defense.<sup>12</sup> In the early days of his father's reign, Mohammed bin Salman's leadership of the Saudi armed forces allowed him to cultivate an image as a decisive leader and project a new nationalism, both of which held great appeal to Saudi Arabia's youthful population. That image of strength, however, has been dented by the prolonged Yemen war, marking another point of potential vulnerability for the young prince.

Mohammed bin Salman's youth appeal is rooted in these two axes of decisive action in the economy and regional affairs. But it reaches beyond these two formal positions. Being much more attuned to his generation's sensibilities and technologies, Mohammed bin Salman has understood the powerful appeal of creativity, entertainment, and celebrity.

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*The weakening of the crown prince and the intensified security situation have facilitated the rise of alternate power centers within the ruling family, centered in the Defense Ministry and royal court.*

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<sup>11</sup> Kristin Smith Diwan, "Royal Factions, Ruling Strategies, and Sectarianism in Bahrain," in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 143-79; Justin Gengler, "Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of 'the Shia Problem' in Bahrain," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 2013): 53-79.

<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Bahrain's crown prince surrendered his position as commander in chief of the Bahrain Defense Forces in 2008.

The Saudi Vision 2030 he is championing appears to be compensating for reduced government support for the next generation with the promise of a broader socioeconomic transformation that would open new avenues of participation in the economy and public life. The development of domestic tourism invites Saudis to explore their country and history. The expansion of NGOs and volunteering opens limited space for civil society. And the cultivation of entertainment and culture through a new Saudi General Entertainment Authority addresses one of the chief complaints of Saudi youth – boredom. All imply a loosening of the sociopolitical strictures that stifle social interaction and global engagement.

Much of the youth-centered activity championed by Mohammed bin Salman takes place through his foundation, MiSK, which seeks to nourish the creative economies valued by many tech-savvy Saudis. Practically, it carries out this mission through initiatives smartly targeting youth where they congregate – social media. In the past year, MiSK has held public events on storytelling, creative writing, digital media, Twitter usage, and technology entrepreneurs. Each brings together young people in a dynamic setting with audiovisual content and appearances by prominent personalities who have emerged from these social media networks.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the cultivation of these young influencers seems to be a key component of the MiSK project. And like Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad's foundation in Bahrain, MiSK offers scholarship competitions to provide educational opportunities abroad – not as expansive as the King Abdullah scholarships, which have brought tens of thousands of Saudis to higher education institutions in the United States and Europe, but more specialized scholarships centered on leadership and creative opportunities, such as a competition to attend the New York Film Academy.

The youth appeal of Mohammed bin Salman is key to both his political program and ruling family ambitions. The expansion of social and private sector opportunities for youth is necessary to offset the government cutbacks and austerity measures undertaken in the early days of the Saudi Vision 2030 reforms. Yet as deputy crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman realizes that his position is tenuous and linked to his father's authority; if Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef came to power he could have him removed from the line of succession, just as King Salman replaced Prince Muqrin. To prevent this occurrence, he needs to make himself valuable, irreplaceable even. Having the overwhelming support of the youth constituency is one strategy for strengthening his standing.

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*The youth appeal of Mohammed bin Salman is key to both his political program and ruling family ambitions.*

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Yet there are risks as well, as mismanagement or the failure to meet the high expectations set for Vision 2030 could instead dent his popularity, harming his status. Should that occur, Mohammed bin Nayef may find himself the beneficiary of a natural coalition of those dissatisfied with Mohammed bin Salman's rapid ascent and Dubai-like reforms – senior princes bypassed in status and decision making, and the religious establishment and Islamist networks that are dissatisfied with the sociocultural opening.

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<sup>13</sup> For a personal view on a MisK event, see Kristin Smith Diwan, "[Saudi Films Challenge Societal Norms at Home, Open Doors Abroad](#)," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, November 28, 2016.

## Foreign Patrons

Popular support from within the country is not the only way to strengthen the hand of an aspiring royal vis a vis rivals. The international status and alliances of a prince may also be used to project power and influence. Due to the extraordinary latitude a Gulf ruler enjoys to shift both economic policies and the strategic positioning of the country, regional and international players may take a keen interest in succession politics. Yet similar to the populist temptation, too close an association with a foreign power may present challenges for a royal competitor, and repercussions for the independence and stability of a Gulf country.

The smaller states of the Gulf littoral have long been wary of the influence and interference of their larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia. That wariness is not unwarranted given Saudi Arabia's willingness at times to intervene in neighboring countries to secure its own interests. Since independence, the long desert borders shared by Gulf countries have been subject to dispute and have resulted in periodic eruptions of conflict.<sup>14</sup> Most notable was the confrontation along the Saudi-Qatari border at al-Khofous in September 1992, which resulted in the exchange of gunfire and two deaths, followed by the Qatari suspension of the 1965 border agreement.

Gwenn Okruhlik and Patrick Conge have argued that the escalating tensions occurred under the "more activist" policy of Emir Hamad, who was foreign minister at the time.<sup>15</sup> These tensions intensified after Emir Hamad came to power in 1995 through an internal palace coup to remove his father. An attempt to return Khalifa bin Hamad to power in 1996 failed. The coup, headed by the former Economy Minister Hamad bin Jassim bin Hamad al-Thani and supported by a tribal faction that spanned the border between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, was reported to have Saudi acquiescence, according to Qatari officials and Western diplomats.<sup>16</sup> The Saudis, and indeed most of the other Gulf leaders, were displeased with the 1995 overthrow, which contravened ruling tribal norms.<sup>17</sup>

Saudi Arabia has twice intervened in Bahrain to preserve the monarchy in the face of domestic unrest: in 1995 and in 2011 as the head of a joint GCC Peninsula Shield Force composed primarily of Saudi Arabian National Guard troops. Both interventions came at the behest of the Al Khalifa ruling family. However, the second intervention during the heated days of Bahrain's "Pearl Uprising" had a differential impact on Bahrain's competing ruling factions.

As mentioned, the constitutionally-designated practice of primogeniture has not eliminated rivalry within the ruling Al Khalifa, particularly among the king's sons and his powerful uncle, the prime minister. Moreover, while the crown prince has been strongly associated with the economy, he lacks the credible base of power in the military his father had established at the head of the Bahrain Defense Forces, despite holding the position of deputy supreme commander. Indeed, in 2008 Crown Prince Salman relinquished the position of commander

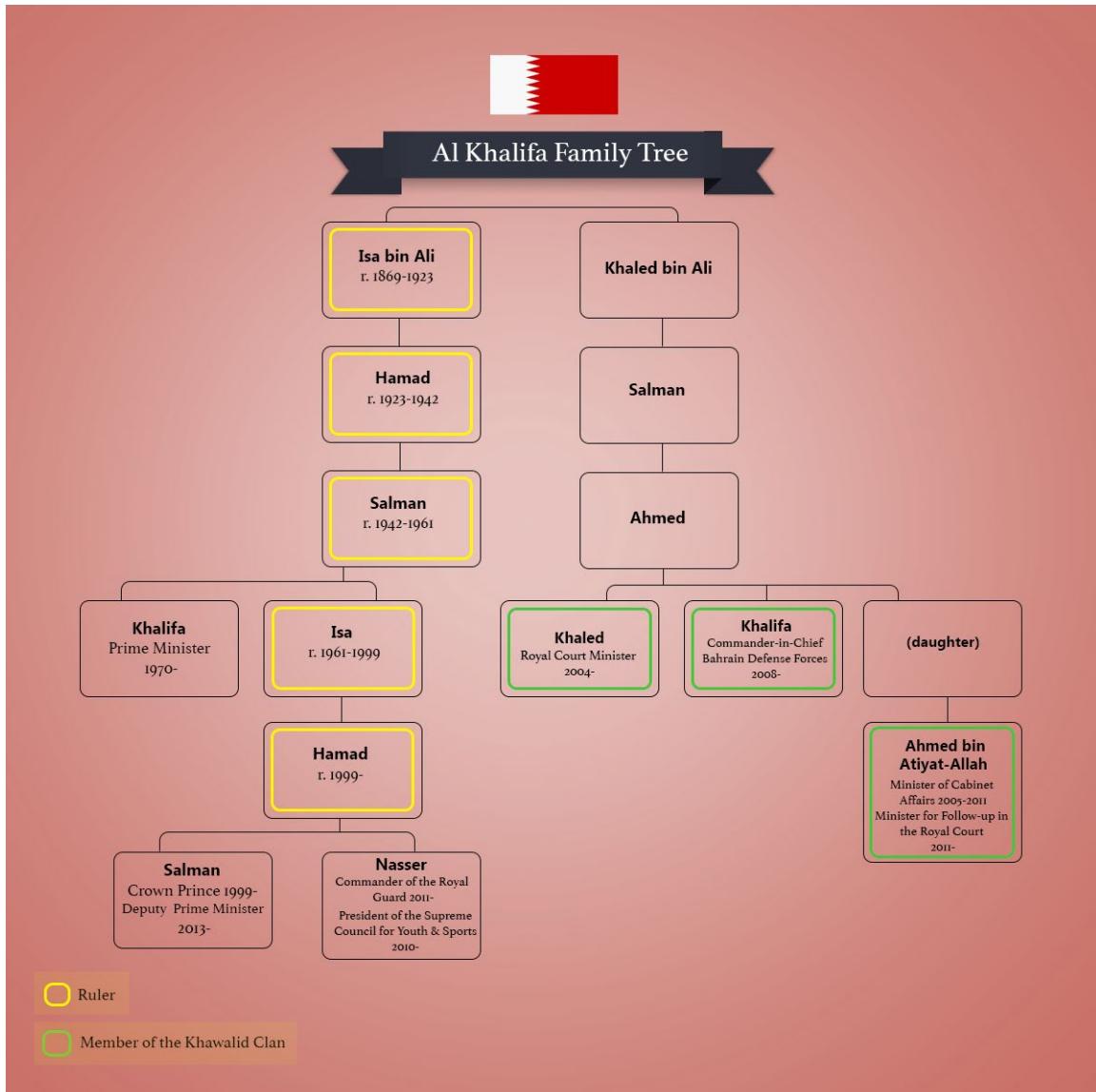
<sup>14</sup> Yoel Guzansky, "Lines Drawn in the Sand: Territorial Disputes and GCC Unity," *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 2016): 543-59.

<sup>15</sup> Gwenn Okruhlik and Patrick Conge, "The Politics of Border Disputes: On the Arabian Peninsula," *International Journal* 54, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 236.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Jehl, "[Young Turk of the Gulf: Emir of Qatar](#)," *The New York Times*, July 10, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph A. Kechichian, *Power and Succession in Arab Monarchies* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 2008): 211.

in chief of the Bahrain Defense Forces to yet another potential rival, Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa. Khalifa was able to augment his power in the security forces through an alliance with his brother, Royal Court Minister Khaled bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, and his nephew, Minister of Cabinet Affairs Ahmed bin Atiyat-Allah al-Khalifa. This hard-line clan grew in influence after the overthrow of the Iraqi government in 2003, as the political empowerment of Shia next door left many in the Bahraini elite anxious about their own Shia-led opposition. This left three identifiable power centers below the king in Bahrain: the prime minister, the crown prince, and alliance known as the "Khawalid," based on their shared ancestor.<sup>18</sup>



<sup>18</sup> The Khawalid take their name from their shared turn-of-the-century ancestor, Khalid bin Ali bin Khalifa al-Khalifa. To read more about the history of the Khawalid, see Justin Gengler, "Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of 'the Shia Problem' in Bahrain," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3, no. 1 (June 2013): 53-79.

The entry of the Peninsula Shield armed forces in March 2011 came at a sensitive time. After initially cracking down on protests and violently clearing the large encampment of protesters assembled at the Pearl Roundabout on February 15, Bahrain's security forces were withdrawn from the roundabout several days later and the crown prince was given authority to negotiate with the official opposition political societies. Yet, by March, Bahrain's streets were the site of running battles between the revolutionary wing of the opposition and a countermobilization of Sunni irregulars bearing sticks and knives. A day after the confrontations turned violent at the Bahrain Financial Harbor, the small but highly symbolic Peninsula Shield forces crossed the causeway between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, effectively ending the uprising along with the crown prince's negotiations.

The ensuing securitization of the state weakened the reformist program of Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, hindering the international investment needed for diversification, and ending the economic and political accommodation made toward the formal Shia opposition. In contrast, the powerbase of the Khawalid in the security sector and their hard-line position toward the Shia were strengthened within the royal court. Effectively, whether by design or consequence, the intervention of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies tipped the power in the ruling family toward the prime minister, who was reputed to be close to the former Saudi Interior Minister Nayef bin Abdulaziz, and the alternative line of the Khawalid.

This had the effect of increasing Saudi Arabia's already considerable leverage over the island. Prior to the unrest, the crown prince and his father had been working to maximize Bahrain's autonomy from its powerful neighbor: diversifying the economy away from its Saudi oil dependence by reforming the domestic economy and linking it more directly to international players. In 2006, for example, Bahrain became the first Gulf state to negotiate a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States. However, after the Saudi intervention, the more internationalist outlook of the crown prince and his economic program were eclipsed by calls for deepening the alliance with the Saudi kingdom, with some even calling for a formal unification.

Still the Al Saud are not the only ruling family with influence in neighboring states. The UAE

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*The Emirati model of economic diversification and global integration has a strong appeal for younger princes in the Gulf.*

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has followed the path of East Asian city-states, becoming an important regional hub for trade, finance, and tourism. The Emirati model of economic diversification and global integration has a strong appeal for younger princes in the Gulf. And flush with wealth and regional ambition, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed has cultivated strong ties with the next generation of royals waiting for their turn on the national stage.

In Bahrain, the reform plans and Economic Vision 2030 overseen by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad had important parallels with the efforts by Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, to streamline government bureaucracy, encourage innovation, and strengthen the indigenous workforce.<sup>19</sup> The UAE also sent troops to Bahrain as part of the Peninsula Shield Force, and continues to invest in the island kingdom through the development fund established

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<sup>19</sup> Becca Wasser and Jeff Martini, "[The Next Generation of Gulf Leaders: The Kids are Alright](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, February 14, 2016.

by the GCC. The UAE's \$2.5 billion fund is financing the expansion of Bahrain's airport and investing in public housing, offering support for the economic reforms still overseen by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad. In a sense, ties to the Emirati rulers have offered Bahrain and the crown prince an important counterweight to Saudi Arabia, and the long-established ties between the prime minister and a previous generation of Al Saud leaders.

In Saudi Arabia, as well, the connection between Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, and Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, is apparent. The UAE considers its close alliance with Saudi Arabia to be of the utmost strategic importance. The substantial Emirati contingent to the Saudi led-military coalition in Yemen is a concrete expression of that commitment. The close relationship between Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman provides a personal connection to that strategic alliance. Yet it also marks the hope the Emirates places in a Saudi reformation: an important shift in Saudi Arabia's outlook and future direction.

Taken as a whole, the changes begun under King Abdullah and intensified under King Salman mark a turn toward a more national vision: development of the national workforce, improvement in government performance, and constraints placed on the religious establishment and informal Islamist networks that have been integral to Saudi Arabia's domestic legitimacy and global leadership. The prospects for sustaining these changes run through Mohammed bin Salman, his Saudi Vision 2030 and National Transformation Program, and his outreach to Saudi youth.

The Emirates and its leadership provide both a source of emulation and a resource in this difficult transformation. In May 2016, Saudi King Salman and UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed signed an agreement to set up a coordination council to deepen the cooperation of the two countries. A follow-up retreat in Abu Dhabi in February chaired by Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Emirati Deputy Prime Minister Mansour bin Zayed and attended by high ranking officials developed 10 "pillars of integration" encompassing the economy, education, as well as politics and security.<sup>20</sup> The youth-centered programs held by the MiSK foundation have also liberally drawn upon Emirati personalities and officials; one recent event centered on digital media featured both the crown prince of Dubai, Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, and the minister of state for youth affairs, Shamma bint Suhail bin Faris al-Mazrui.

According to recent media reports, Mohammed bin Zayed's advocacy for the young deputy crown prince and his programs extends to cultivating support for him in Washington, DC.<sup>21</sup>

There is little question that the Western powers that have secured the Gulf, first Britain and now the United States, could play a decisive role in succession politics in the Gulf countries. Britain's deeper involvement in its historic base of power, Bahrain, is evidence of this. However,

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*In May 2016, Saudi King Salman and UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed signed an agreement to set up a coordination council to deepen the cooperation of the two countries.*

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<sup>20</sup> "Saudi-UAE Coordination Council Meeting Kicks Off in Abu Dhabi," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, February 21, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Mazzetti and Ben Hubbard, "Rise of Saudi Prince Shatters Decades of Royal Tradition," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2016.

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with that notable exception, they have chosen not to do so.<sup>22</sup> Instead, the United States and Britain have generally pursued a policy of building relations with existing rulers, offering criticism mostly in private, and leaving the royal politics to the royals.

Still, this doesn't mean that Gulf monarchs do not value a special relationship with their U.S. interlocutors, and seek to leverage U.S. support, both for their country and as an additional asset in factional competition. As mentioned, Bahrain's Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad cultivated a strong strategic connection to the United States, orchestrating the first Gulf country free trade agreement with the United States. This worked to diversify Bahrain's commercial and political ties and ease its dependence on Saudi Arabia, while simultaneously opening a new economic base beyond the merchants strongly linked to the prime minister. The United States offered strong support for the crown prince's negotiations with the opposition at the time of the 2011 crisis, but this support did not prevent the decline in his influence with the retreat of the reform agenda.

In Abu Dhabi, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed took the lead in consolidating and expanding military, intelligence, and economic ties with the United States, especially after the September 11 attacks. This certainly strengthened his "indispensable" status for the federation and for Khalifa bin Zayed once Zayed bin Sultan died.

Mehran Kamrava has argued persuasively that upon coming to power, Qatar's Emir Hamad bin Khalifa pursued a political reform agenda in order to consolidate his support domestically, but also to cultivate stronger ties with the United States.<sup>23</sup> This was necessary to counter the perceived Saudi hostility to his rule. In this he succeeded, as the United States and Qatar did deepen their political and military ties, with the United States moving the forward base of the U.S. Central Command to the Al Udeid airbase in 2003. The political reforms within his agenda lost priority once the emir felt his rule was secured.

The U.S. leadership has built a relationship of trust and respect for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef due to his effective counterterrorism measures within the kingdom and valuable intelligence sharing with the United States. It has been noteworthy, then, that Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has been a frequent visitor to the United States since his father assumed the throne. His twin positions as minister of defense and chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs have certainly given him a platform to interact with a diverse cross section of U.S. officials and private sector executives.

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<sup>22</sup> Appeals during the unrest of 2011 by a former U.S. state department official (Elliott Abrams, ["Last Chance for Bahrain," CNN Global Public Square](#), November 25, 2011) and pundit (Thomas W. Lippman, ["The U.S. Dilemma in Bahrain," Project on Middle East Democracy](#), September 22, 2011) for the United States to distance from hard liners and push the prime minister of Bahrain to resign went unheeded. Gause argues that such pressures would be destabilizing – and counter to U.S. interests – in the dynastic monarchies, F. Gregory Gause, III, ["Kings for All Seasons: How the Middle East's Monarchies Survived the Arab Spring," Brookings Doha Center, Analysis Paper no. 8](#), September 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Mehran Kamrava, "Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalization in Qatar," *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 400-20.

## The New Information Environment

As competition heightens within ruling families, they face a more difficult environment for containing their internal struggles. As royal contenders seek to build internal and external coalitions, a more engaged public is watching and sometimes commenting on the proceedings. Strategic leaks to damage a rival are yet another temptation, one that directly threatens the discretion and solidarity necessary for the protection of royal rule.

The information ecosystem in the kingdom has changed dramatically as digital and social media, as well as social messaging platforms, have become a part of daily life. Saudi Arabia has the highest Twitter penetration in the world as well as the highest per capita consumption of YouTube. Social chat and messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Snapchat accessed through mobile applications are also prevalent and increasing in popularity. Collectively, this marks a sea change in a country with restricted public life and sharply controlled information flows.

The difficulty of containing leaks and rumors in this new Saudi information environment is aptly illustrated by the emergence of the anonymous Saudi “whistleblower” on Twitter @mujtahidd. Mujtahidd, which means studious in Arabic, began tweeting in 2011, and is known for “revelations” about government ineptitude and the actions of ruling family members, particularly financial scandals and power struggles. In a 2012 interview in Al Akhbar, Mujtahidd implied that his, her, or their information came from Saudi ruling family members sympathetic to reform who “have no power, but they have information” that they can leak.<sup>24</sup> The hidden identity of the source, and the near impossibility of substantiating the rumors as revelations, has not dented Mujtahidd’s popularity for many Saudis and foreign observers alike, who while applying appropriate skepticism to often exaggerated claims, view the feed as “a good window into the thought process of Saudi insiders.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus the high stakes period of succession in Saudi Arabia upon the death of King Abdullah in January 2015 faced a rigorous public test. A rapt public observed the smooth transition of power from King Abdullah to his chosen successor and half-brother King Salman, the long-time governor of Riyadh and, for a time, minister of defense. The new king quickly named his son Mohammed bin Salman as his replacement as defense minister, and signaled the move to the next generation by appointing Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef to the position newly created under King Abdullah, deputy crown prince, below Abdullah’s chosen crown-prince-in-waiting Prince Muqrin. A few days later, rival lines – the progeny of the deceased former Defense Minister Sultan bin Abdulaziz and the sons of King Abdullah – were relieved of their positions, with the exception of Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, who was left in charge of his father’s old power base at the Saudi Arabian National Guard. The more dramatic changes

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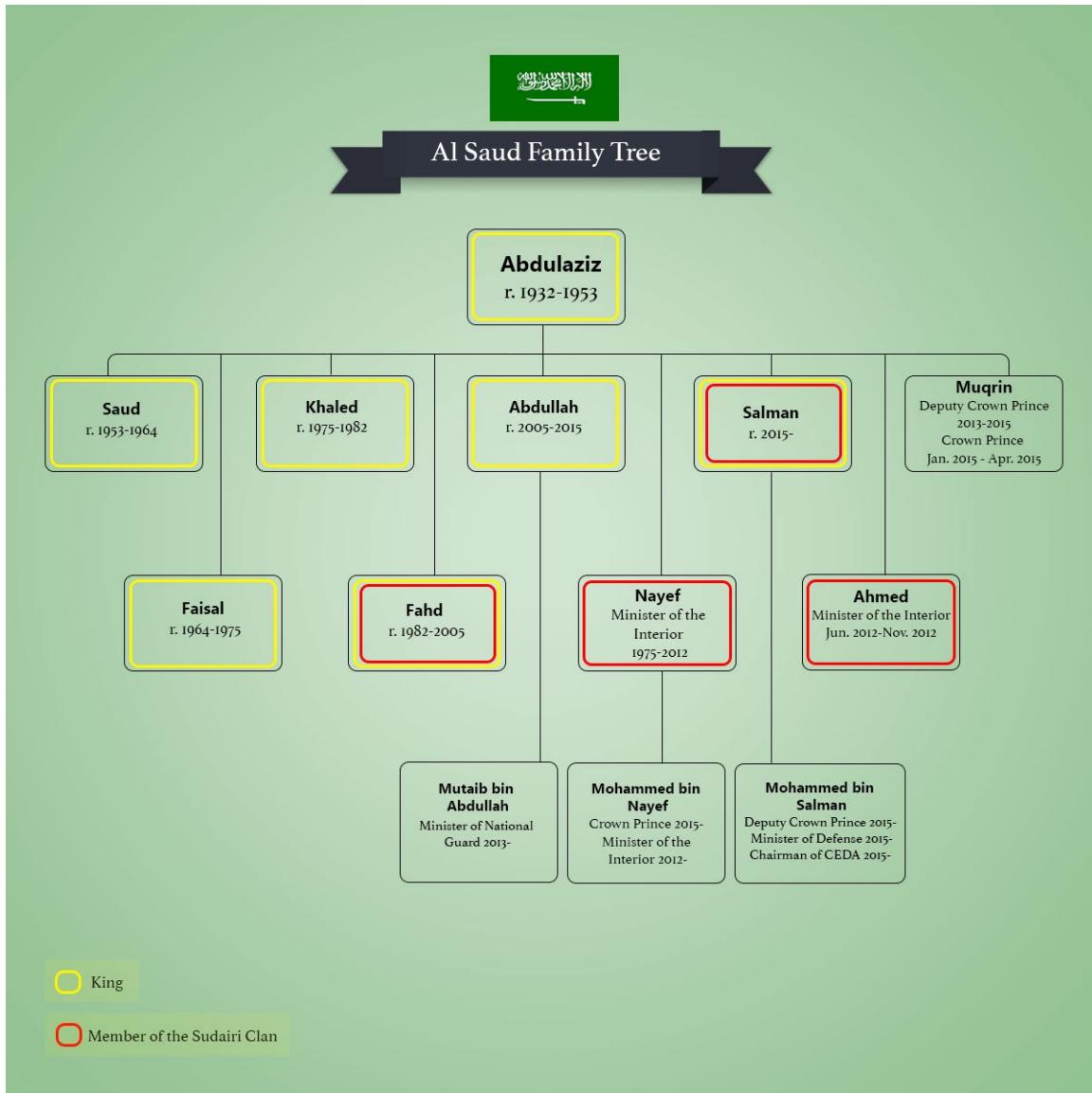
*The information ecosystem in the kingdom has changed dramatically as digital and social media, as well as social messaging platforms, have become a part of daily life.*

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<sup>24</sup> Jomana Farhat, “[Mujtahidd: A Tweeting Thorn in the Side of AlSaud](#),” *Al-Akhbar English*, February 20, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Nathan Field, “[Judging Anonymous Tweets: The Case of @Mujtahidd](#),” *The Arabist blog*, February 27, 2013.

came in April 2015 when King Salman dismissed Prince Muqrin, elevating the next generation Mohammed bin Nayef to crown prince, and opening up the position of deputy crown prince for his own son, Mohammed bin Salman.



Mohammed bin Salman's rapid rise from public obscurity was equaled by a quick consolidation of power centers under his authority. A streamlining of the economic decision-making structure placed Mohammed bin Salman at the head of both the newly created Supreme Council of Saudi Aramco and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. The latter was formed through the dissolution of 13 interministerial councils and commissions once headed by top royals, including the Supreme Petroleum Council and its crucial oil portfolio, in favor of a single administrative council linked to the Council of Ministers. In retrospect, these important changes paved the way for the linking of oil wealth, highlighted by the planned privatization of a small portion of Aramco, to the broader restructuring of the economy set

by Mohammed bin Salman's reform plan, Saudi Vision 2030. The shift in power was further accentuated by the disbanding of the court serving the crown prince, while Mohammed bin Salman maintained his access to the royal court of his father, the king.

These critical decrees came swiftly and without public deliberation. And given the enormity of the shifts in both power and governmental structure, the ruling family controlled the public narrative rather well: These changes generated intense public interest, and some anxiety, but did not result in any significant public dissent. Indeed, the shift to the new generation of princes was received with some enthusiasm by the young public engaged through social media.

Yet the unease within the royal house itself was not fully contained. In September 2015, a break in royal unity was delivered to the media, specifically the British newspaper *The Guardian* in the form of two open letters penned by a grandson of the kingdom's founder and addressed to "the sons and grandsons of King Abdulaziz." The letters called for the removal of King Salman in favor of another senior member of the ruling family.<sup>26</sup> In an interview, the royal dissident claimed that a consensus was building around Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, the last of the Sudairi faction of full brothers within the ruling family. The letter denounced the unprecedented concentration of power under the young prince, Mohammed bin Salman, questioned the health of King Salman, and voiced concern over the rash policies of the new administration most strongly indicated by the decision to go to war in Yemen. This unprecedented royal dissent was widely read: At the time of its publication, *The Guardian* said it had been viewed over 2 million times.<sup>27</sup>

While it is impossible to know the level of support the letters garnered within the ruling family, they did provide a window into the apprehension the upending of royal precedent was generating in some royal circles. The unnamed prince claimed that the second generation was uneasy with the succession changes and that four or five of his uncles would meet to discuss the letters. Two points stand out: the violation of deference to age and the violation of the norm of seeking consensus and sharing power within the ruling family. The letter writer was unsettled by the rapid elevation of the young Mohammed bin Salman over older and more seasoned royals, and appeals to the sons of Abdulaziz "from the oldest, Bandar, to the youngest, Muqrin" to convene a meeting of senior royals with the intent of replacing King Salman with "the oldest and most capable." It also calls for them to abolish "the strange, new position of deputy crown prince," another deviation from royal tradition. The call for the convening of senior royals also speaks to the concern that many royals and their sons were being shut out of the new more centralized power structure, and explicitly notes the need "to bring in expertise from the ruling family whatever generation they are from."<sup>28</sup>

This very public airing of grievances was followed by at least two other open letters by unidentified royals.<sup>29</sup> Yet, despite this indication of some splits within the ruling family, no change in the power structure came of it, and the public, though attentive to the royal

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Miles, "[Saudi Royal Calls for Regime Change in Riyadh](#)," *The Guardian*, September 28, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "[Saudi Royal Writes Letters Calling for Regime Change](#)," *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> David Ignatius, "[A Cyclone Brews over Saudi Arabia](#)," *The Washington Post*, October 13, 2015.

jockeying for power, did not mobilize behind any contender. Not so in Kuwait, where the early maneuvering for next generation leadership resulted not only in unprecedented leaks, but also parliamentary action, court proceedings, and oppositional mobilization.

It was noted previously how the struggle between two nephews of the emir waged through coalitions within the Kuwaiti Parliament resulted in a very public corruption scandal and the removal of one of the contenders, Prime Minister Nasseral-Mohammed, as head of government. The no-holds-barred battle between the two royal contenders did not end with the fall of the government. Ahmed al-Fahd, still deprived of a government position, was at the center of yet another controversy. His possession of a controversial recording allegedly revealing a plot to overthrow the emir by Nasser al-Mohammed and the former head of Parliament, Jassim al-Kharafi, was leaked via an anonymous post on Twitter. These allegations, following on the earlier ones purporting to show evidence of government bribes to parliamentarians, again were shared on social media, prompting a public prosecutor to intervene and place a gag order on any circulation of news about the tapes while the charges were investigated. This gag order further ensnared one of the country's leading newspapers and vehicle for opposition stances, Al Watan, which was first suspended, and later shut down altogether.

While the gag order, backed by warnings from the Royal Court, damped public chatter about the case on social and traditional media, it did nothing to prevent competing public statements by ruling family members and allied government officials who testified in court and briefed Kuwait's spirited Parliament. Ahmed al-Fahd eventually lost the court case, which ruled that the tape showed evidence of tampering, and was forced by the family to publicly acknowledge his wrongdoing. Still, even this did not fully end his rebellion. He later used his influential position at the head of international sports to condemn Kuwaiti sports federations for political interference, resulting in the eventual banning of Kuwait teams from both international FIFA soccer competitions and the 2016 Olympics. The latter was particularly embarrassing as a Kuwaiti athlete won the country's first gold medal, yet was not able to compete under the Kuwaiti flag.

The lack of restraint and discretion by Kuwait royal rivals has ensnared public institutions and the public more generally. The courts were enlisted to tap down both the royal leaks and public discussion of it. And the courts are being relied upon more widely to prosecute individuals who, quite reasonably, see these royal attacks as an invitation to issue their own critiques of leadership on social media. It is not a coincidence that the invocation of *lèse-majesté*, the insulting of a monarch, and prosecution of Kuwaitis violating that constitutional principle, mostly through social media, have increased exponentially. The ruling family is also having to resort to more severe measures to publicly punish royals who step out of line, either in political competition or publicly known crimes. In Kuwait, the brother of Ahmed al-Fahd and two other royals were sentenced to prison in connection with the "tapes" case for

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publishing false news and insulting judges via WhatsApp and Twitter.<sup>30</sup> The royal owner of Al Watan newspaper, which covered the story despite the legal gag order, was also sentenced. And in other signs that harsher measures were necessary to discipline growing ruling families before an attentive public, both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia executed royals convicted of murder alongside other convicts this year.<sup>31</sup>

Gulf princes who do not hold formal positions are strongly discouraged from developing public profiles on political issues. Still, the growing number of royals and the broadening scope for public discussion, especially through social media, has drawn more royals to public comment. Since 2011, a small number of princes outside of ruling contention have used social media to burnish their reputations and presumably increase their leverage within the ruling family. Some have even taken it a step further, participating in electoral politics, in further evidence of how the growth of royal families is testing traditional norms and prohibitions.

In 2006, a Kuwaiti royal from the disenfranchised Salem line declared himself sympathetic to the youth-driven popular protests for political reform, and registered himself as a candidate for Parliament. Prince Fahad al-Salem told reporters that “forces” tried to quiet him: “They gave me everything to stop, and I couldn’t.”<sup>32</sup> Still, he withdrew before elections took place. Another Kuwaiti royal pitched a campaign tent to run in parliamentary elections in October 2016, but again was eliminated before they took place by a court ruling.<sup>33</sup> Under the Kuwaiti constitution, royals are eligible to run for Parliament, but ruling family norms strongly discourage them from doing so.

Yet another Kuwaiti royal has been using social media, SnapChat to be precise, to cultivate a different audience. Prince Majed al-Sabah has gained a devoted following for his cultivated trips. His adventures around the world and especially in the Gulf highlight culture and sites, seeking to inform his more than a million followers. This has earned him the attention and patronage of influential royals in neighboring countries, who value his followers and positive messaging building bonds – and brands – across the GCC.<sup>34</sup>

In Bahrain, the younger brother of Crown Prince Salman, Nasser bin Hamad, has cultivated a dynamic social media persona as a sportsman and patriot. His Instagram feed has a million followers and is curated with pictures of him winning IRONMAN competitions and participating in equestrian and shooting events. His nationalist image was further enhanced, in some quarters,<sup>35</sup> when pictures leaked on social media of him and another brother on the front

<sup>30</sup> [“Kuwait Prosecutor Wants 29-Year Term for Convicted Royals,”](#) AFP, June 13, 2016. Other royals were arrested in 2012 for tweets sympathetic to the Kuwait opposition. [“Kuwaiti Royals Arrested for Critical Government Tweets,”](#) AFP, November 9, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> [“Kuwait Executes Seven, Including a Royal Convicted of Murder,”](#) Reuters, January 25, 2017; Pete Burn and Laura Smith-Spark, [“Saudi Arabia Executes Member of Royal Family,”](#) CNN, October 20, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Dan Lothian and Erika Dommier, [“Kuwait Royal Calls for Democracy inside ‘Own House,’”](#) CNN, April 28, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> [“Kuwait Royal to Contest Election, in Rare Move,”](#) AFP, October 19, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Allison Collins, [“Social Media Star Sheikh Majed Al-Sabah Floods Bergdorf’s with Fans,”](#) WWD, April 16, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Nasser bin Hamad’s popularity breaks along with the sharp political divisions in Bahrain. The opposition accuses him of personally partaking in the torture of athletes who participated in protests and were detained during the heated days of the Pearl Uprising.

lines with Bahraini troops in Yemen.<sup>36</sup> The latter is characteristic of the more nationalist stance of many young royals, from Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's publicized personal visits to the Yemen front lines, and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed's visits to the families of soldiers killed in the Yemen war.

These few examples give a taste of the attractions and opportunities royals may have in appealing to a broader and younger audience in a more direct and immediate fashion. While this may represent an upside for individual royals, it also challenges the traditional norms of royal engagement, which value discretion and control above all else.

## Conclusion: The Future of Succession

New generation royals have already changed the face of the Gulf. The generational shift in leadership that took place in the 1990s has brought greater attention to improving public administration and a consequent reliance on technocratic advisors and consultants. It has marked a new turn toward more nationalist policies in: employment, the introduction of national service, and the celebration of national days. It has introduced more ambitious global agendas, as new generation royals have sought to deploy the wealth of the most recent oil boom toward a stronger leadership role in regional politics, and the regional and global economy.

Bold agendas of new generation royals increase their stature and their country's global relevance. But they have also placed these royals and the countries that they lead at risk of overextending, especially now that the Gulf is entering a period of austerity. Qatar's outreach to Arab publics through media and political support, and its global branding through international sport and other ventures left the tiny emirate dangerously overstretched, both politically and financially. It is telling that the transition to Emir Tamim has not followed the pattern of generational change begun with his father. Instead, he has scaled back Qatar's global engagements, especially political ones, focusing his energy on domestic reform, now especially appropriate with Qatar's tightening budget.

It is possible that the UAE, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, may also experience such a reckoning. The UAE's distinctive position leading the global struggle against extremism and Islamist activism, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, has led it to engage in multiple foreign conflicts and suffer the still novel loss of Emirati soldiers in foreign battles. Its strong partnership with Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is likewise a bit of a gamble, and could leave the Emirati leadership exposed if the Saudi succession and program were to go in a different direction.

Mohammed bin Salman has forthrightly projected himself as the public face of two major campaigns: the war in Yemen and Saudi Vision 2030. With public unease growing over the Yemen campaign and deep challenges confronting economic restructuring of the kingdom, he is certain to face growing resistance, from the public and perhaps from disgruntled royals.

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<sup>36</sup> "Bahrain's King: My Sons Will Be Sent to Help Coalition Forces in Yemen," *Al Arabiya*, September 7, 2015.

Both could weaken his ability to hold the position within the succession process if his father were to pass away, or more ambitiously, to orchestrate with his father his early elevation to crown prince.

Sharp competition or disagreements among leading contenders for royal leadership in Kuwait and Bahrain have weakened the dominant ruling lines, creating an opening for the influence of more peripheral clans. The growing importance of the Khawalid in Bahrain has led to some speculation that they could disrupt the constitutional transfer of power to Crown Prince Salman, perhaps in favor of the more hard-line younger prince, Nasser bin Hamad. In Kuwait, the new prominence of members of alternate lines, such as the current Prime Minister Jaber al-Mubarak al-Sabah, are likewise indicative of this change. With the informal powersharing between the Jaber and Salem lines discarded, new generation descendants of other sons of Mubarak the Great now have aspirations for the throne.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, in the cases of Bahrain and Kuwait, it is plausible that royal factionalism has contributed to the polarization of society and even the weakening of the state. The reliance on particular constituencies in factional battles has exacerbated social divisions: sectarian divisions in Bahrain and sectarian as well as urban-tribal tensions in Kuwait. The outcome in Bahrain has been to turn to foreign solutions, such as unity with Saudi Arabia. And in Kuwait, the perennial conflict in the Parliament along with the preoccupation of the ruling family with its internal affairs are contributing to the neglect of economic development. The new Parliament elected in November 2016 looks to continue this trend, as the first minister brought down through parliamentary interpolation was targeted for his failure to resolve Kuwait's ban from global sport, and implicitly, the ruling family feud with the president of the Olympic Council of Asia and royal aspirant, Ahmed al-Fahd.

There could be a similar social split in Saudi Arabia if the implicit competition between Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman becomes more explicit. The cultivation of rival constituencies – Mohammed bin Nayef with more conservative princes and social actors and Mohammed bin Salman with a more liberal base – could yield the social polarization seen in Kuwait and Bahrain.

Oman has been little mentioned in this study as it is not a dynastic monarchy: The sultan rules alone, apart from his family, and his ministers owe their positions and wealth to him. However, this makes Oman's historic transition the most unpredictable and potentially the most momentous. By encouraging the identification of contemporary Oman with his rule and rejecting the public designation of a crown prince, Sultan Qaboos invites a power vacuum once he inevitably passes from the scene.<sup>38</sup> The sultan's recent decision to appoint a cousin, Sayyid Assad bin Tariq al-Said, as deputy prime minister for international cooperation, has

<sup>37</sup> Rivka Azoulay and Claire Beaugrand, "Limits of Political Clientelism: Elites' Struggles in Kuwait Fragmenting Politics," *Arabian Humanities* 4 (2015): 4.

<sup>38</sup> For more analysis of this transition see Gary A. Grappo, "[In the Shadow of Qaboos: Contemplating Leadership Change in Oman](#), *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 3, 2015; Marc Valeri, "[Simmering Unrest and Succession Challenges in Oman](#)," *Caregie Endowment for International Peace*, January 28, 2015.

elevated him in the eyes of many as the likely successor.<sup>39</sup> Although there has been some speculation that succession could jump a generation to Assad's son, Taimur. Constitutionally, the decision is to be made by a convening of the Ruling Family Council, but it is not clear the exact composition of that council nor even if it has ever met.

While distinct in their particularities, all of the Gulf monarchies betray some elements of new generation dynamics. History suggests that internal feuds within Gulf ruling families will be resolved once the designated heir of the new generation is ensconced, but history may not hold in all cases. The current generational changes have seen the norms of ruling houses – age deference, discretion – weaken under the weight of growing families and maturing publics. Whichever faction prevails will of necessity expend more energy patrolling errant royals and extend more attention to the public cultivation of subject-citizens.

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<sup>39</sup> While another cousin of the sultan, Fahd bin Mahmoud al-Said, already holds the rank of deputy prime minister for Cabinet affairs, he is seen as unlikely to claim the throne as his children have a French mother.

