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Consequences of Kuwaiti Succession for the GCC Courtney Freer

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Introduction

Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah was one of the leading statesmen of the GCC and throughout the Middle East. Indeed, he was one of the few leaders anywhere in the Arab world whose death has been met with statements of condolence and admiration – both from international partners and from members of the domestic opposition. With his death come concerns that Kuwaiti foreign policy may diverge from the role that Sheikh Sabah largely carved for it during his tenure as foreign minister from 1963-2003 and later as amir between 2006 and 2020.

In particular, Sheikh Sabah's death has led many to question what the future is for an already fractured GCC. Indeed, the former Kuwaiti amir, as a champion of multilateralism in the region, was critical to the founding of the GCC in 1981; in fact, the first GCC president was a Kuwaiti diplomat, Abdullah Bishara, representing Kuwaiti commitment to the project; Bishara notably continued after his tenure as GCC secretary-general and even after his retirement to advise Sheikh Sabah as prime minister.

At present, with half of the member states (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) blockading Qatar, multilateralism in the Gulf has undoubtedly already been badly damaged. Sheikh Sabah played a leading role in efforts at mediation between the two parties, and, notably,

Kuwait successfully facilitated behind closed doors an agreement between Qatar and the blockading states to [heal the 2014 rift](#). With Sheikh Sabah no longer in power, then, what will become of Kuwait's mediating role in the Gulf?

The future Kuwaiti Foreign Policy

Similar concerns about a foreign policy shift arose [after the death of Sultan Qaboos](#), with many in the Gulf fearing that the sultan's death would also lead to the end of Oman's neutral foreign policy, particularly toward the GCC crisis. What has happened instead is that Sultan Haitham bin Tariq appears to have focussed his agenda inward, on domestic issues, with foreign policy thus far largely as it was. When it comes to Kuwait, I believe that Sheikh Sabah's death, while certainly a large blow to the Gulf and particularly to multilateralism in the region more generally, will not signal the end of Kuwaiti foreign policy for a number of reasons.

First, Kuwaiti foreign policy is regionally revered and effective. Kuwait has impressively maintained its relations with a variety of countries and has many partners, aided by the expansion of its diplomatic presence and humanitarian activities that took place largely under Sheikh Sabah's tenure as foreign minister. The ability to speak with everyone makes Kuwait a key regional player, which is a source of national pride as well. Indeed, the Kuwaiti leadership is not seen as not

acting as rashly as, for instance, Saudi Arabia under Mohamed bin Salman, in taking on an adventurist or overstretched foreign policy. Beyond popularity in Kuwait, however, Kuwait's reputation for mediation has garnered it regional recognition as well, since Kuwait provides a neutral place of engagement for international organisations like [NATO](#) and [the EU](#), which have diplomatic missions there, and for others in the region. Further, Kuwait's stance [firmly against normalisation with Israel](#), discussed at greater length below, has also been popular regionally, as it is seen to portray a broader commitment to Arab solidarity.

Second, Kuwaiti parliament has a history of trying to influence foreign policy, meaning that public opinion about foreign policy issues matters in Kuwait in a way that it does not in other Gulf countries. For instance, when Sheikh Nasser Mohammed was prime minister, three Islamist MPs filed a request to grill former Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammed al-Ahmed al-Sabah on grounds that a Shii cleric had been allowed entry into the country, sparking suspicion that the prime minister was somehow aligned with Iran. More recently, a group of 37 MPs issued a statement confirming their ["unyielding and firm support for the Palestinian people"](#) and calling on the government to remain steadfast against normalising with Israel. [As Sean Yom has pointed out](#), ideological concerns can and in some cases have constrained Kuwaiti foreign policy; allowing for domestic political freedoms through parliament has indeed opened the door for ideological concerns to

become a part of foreign policy considerations, and, in this way, Kuwait is very different from its neighbours.

Third, Kuwait has successfully managed to be independent from its neighbours in pursuing a neutral and moderate foreign policy. This policy has been built over decades, and it would be near-impossible, not to mention strategically unwise, to dismantle that. While foreign policy directions in neighbouring states have changed rapidly, particularly as new generations have come into power, as mentioned above, institutions matter in Kuwait, and so changing foreign policy direction would be difficult.

The impact over the GCC

In terms of what succession means for the GCC as an institution, it has certainly lost a powerful supporter in Sheikh Sabah. Nonetheless, Kuwait under Sheikh Nawaf will likely continue to play the balancing and mediating role that it had under Sheikh Sabah, at least insofar as the GCC as an institution allows for such a role. With the GCC crisis having entered its fourth year, the institution has undoubtedly become weaker, and today it is unclear what new strategies of mediation may succeed, particularly after years of little communication between the parties in conflict.

As a result, I do not believe the succession will have a major effect on the GCC crisis, largely because I do not see it having a major influence on Kuwaiti foreign policy, discussed in greater detail above. Kuwait and Qatar remain allies, and Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has [arrived](#)

[in Kuwait](#) for the funeral for Sheikh Sabah. This alliance is unlikely to break down with the change in Kuwaiti leadership and may spur additional efforts to mediate an end to the rift.

About the author

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