

## Kuwait after the Death of Emir Sabah

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On September 29th, Sheikh Sabah Salem AlSabah, the Emir of Kuwait, passed away. Emir Sabah was a diplomat par excellence. Under his aegis, Kuwait maintained good relations with a large number of countries and acted as a mediator in the Yemen war and the Gulf crisis. As an advocate of a multilateral order, Sabah was a driving force behind the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council. He also used his skills in Kuwait itself to unite a sometimes very heterogeneous society and rival political camps.

The political system of Kuwait is very different from that of the other Gulf states: it has a lively civil society and a strong parliament. MPs can remove ministers and revoke an emir's veto with a two-thirds majority. At the same time the emir can dissolve parliament; which happened several times. It is a proud parliament in which at times a very harsh political culture is cultivated.

The decease of the 91 years old Sheikh Sabah Salem AlSabah, the Emir of Kuwait, poses two important interrelated questions: firstly, who is going to be Kuwait's new crown prince and what does he stand for? And secondly, will Kuwait under the ruling of the new Emir change its regional foreign policies with regard to Iran, the Gulf crisis, and Israel?

Prior to 2006, the year when Sheikh Sabah became the Emir of Kuwait, the issue of succession was predictable. For over a century, the descendants of Salem and Jaber, the sons of Sheikh [Mubarak AlSabah](#) (1896-1915), the founder of current Kuwait, alternated in ruling Kuwait. However, in 2006 when Sheikh Jaber AlSabah died, the crown prince, then Sheikh Saad Abdullah AlSabah, from the Salem branch, failed to succeed him. Sheikh Sabah Salem AlSabah (from Jaber branch), who was then the prime minister and who served his country as foreign minister for 40 years, made the case that the crown prince was sick and therefore unfit to become the Emir of Kuwait. With the support of the parliament and the public, the prime minister deposed the crown prince and became Emir, by this breaking a century of traditions that governed the issue of succession in Kuwait. In doing so, the Emir Sabah set a precedent that might be followed after him.

On September 29<sup>th</sup> 2020, Sheikh Nawaf Alahmad AlSabah was named the new emir. He had been chosen as crown prince by the deceased Emir from Salem's branch of the family to diffuse the rift within the Sabah's family after deposing Sheikh Saad in 2006. He is 83 years old, sick and regularly traveling to the US for treatment. While his position as the new Emir of the country is not contested, his age and his health troubles will open the door for contestation over who is going to succeed him. That is to say, who is going to be the new crown prince. This is especially true because [article four of the constitution](#) of Kuwait forces the new Emir to choose a crown prince in his first year.

### Succession in the Constitution

Article 4 of the 1962 Kuwaiti constitution states that "Kuwait is a hereditary Emirate, the succession to which shall be in the descendants of the late Mubarak Al-Sabah." It also states that the crown prince "shall be designated within one year, at the latest, from the date of accession of the Emir" and approved by a majority vote in parliament. In case parliament does not approve the Emir's nomination of the crown prince, the Emir "shall nominate at least three of the descendants of the late Mubarak al-Sabah of whom the parliament shall pledge allegiance to one as Heir Apparent."

[The 1964 Law of Succession](#) in the Emirate, which is considered part of the constitution, states in article 3 that "if the Emir lost the health capacity to exercise his powers, then the Council of Ministers must present the

matter to the parliament immediately for consideration in a private secret session." If it is proven to be true, "the parliament shall decide, by a majority of two-thirds of its members to transfer power temporarily or permanently to the crown prince."

Article 8 of the same law states that in case "the crown prince loses the health ability to exercise his powers" the parliament "shall decide by the majority of the members to transfer the exercise of the powers of the crown prince temporarily or permanently to others in accordance with the terms and conditions stipulated in Article 4 of the constitution."

Therefore, in case competitors want to contest the succession of crown prince Nawaf, they can do so based on his health conditions. This, however, is unlikely taking into consideration that currently there is no central power within the ruling family that can rally both the support of the family and the parliament to contest the ruling of the new Emir, Sheikh Nawaf. The competition between the power centers will most likely take place in the first year of the ruling of the new Emir when he starts family consultations to appoint the crown prince.

## Power Centers in the Ruling Family

According to different sources, there are several power centers in the ruling family, but three of them are more prominent as they are centered around prominent figures:

[Sheikh Naser AlSabah](#) (72 years): he is the son of the recently deceased Emir and from the Jaber branch of the AlSabah family. He became defense minister and deputy prime minister in 2017 and gained enormous popularity in Kuwait for his work on the 'Kuwait Vision 2035' and his efforts to fight corruption. However, his father asked him to resign when he revealed in November 2019 [an embezzlement](#) of more than US \$ 700 million from a fund preserved to the military personnel by his predecessor in the defense ministry. The case is still in the courts and Sheikh Naser is currently the deputy president for the Higher Council of Planning.

[Sheikh Mohammed Sabah AlSalem](#) (64 years): he is a former deputy prime minister and a former minister of finance, oil, planning and foreign affairs. He resigned from the government in 2011 accusing it of failing to fight corruption. According to news reports, he is the first candidate of the Salem branch of the ruling family to be the crown prince; however, since his resignation, he has disappeared from the political scene.

[Sheikh Naser Mohammed AlSabah](#) (80 years): he was the prime minister of Kuwait between 2006 and 2011. He is popular among influential businessmen as well as the Shia in Kuwait and politically close to Riyadh. Because the Shia makes almost 30% of the population, having their support is necessary to maintain the national unity in the country.

Other power centers rally around Sheikh Mashal AlSabah (80 years), the brother of the deceased Emir and deputy president of the national guards; Sheikh Jaber AlSabah (77 years), the former prime minister; and Sheikh Ahmed Alfahad AlSabah (54 years), the president of Olympic Council of Asia and Asian Handball Federation. However, none of these three candidates has a real chance to be the new crown prince. Sheikh Mashal is sick; Sheikh Jaber resigned as prime minister because of accusations of corruption; and Sheikh Ahmed is neither from the Salem nor the Jaber branch of the ruling family.

As stated earlier, if the position of the new crown prince is contested, parliament must approve the new candidate. In this regard, Sheikh Naser AlSabah has little chances to be approved by the current parliament who in the past opposed his "Kuwait Vision 2035" project as it calls for the privatization of state-owned companies. Sheikh Naser Mohammed as well has little chances to win parliament's approval because of his inclination towards Riyadh at time the parliament is in favor of maintaining the current Kuwaiti neutral foreign policy. Furthermore, the debate within the family over who should be appointed as a crown prince most likely will take time due to the balance of power between the competing candidates.

In any case, predicting who is going to be the new crown prince is very difficult in the time being as the AlSabah family needs to project unity to its own people and to the world during at least the mourning period, which last [forty days](#). Therefore, the issue of succession will most likely be decided by the new members of the parliament following the upcoming November parliamentarian's elections this year.

## Kuwait's Foreign Policy

While it is true that each power center in the AlSabah ruling family has a certain political inclination - e.g. Sheikh Naser AlSabah is in favor of stronger relations with China - it is equally true that the pillars which shape Kuwaiti current foreign policy are going to remain the same in the foreseeable future ensuring the continuity of the deceased Emir's foreign policy, which focused on maintaining good relations with neighbouring countries, mediation between countries in conflict, and the prevention of escalation. The new Emir, Sheikh Nawaf, has pointed to this continuity in Kuwait's foreign policy when he was [sworn in before the parliament](#) saying "we proudly remember the directions of the late prince, which will remain our guiding light."

Kuwait has strived to remain neutral in the Gulf crisis between Qatar on the one hand and Saudi-Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain on the other hand. It supports the nuclear deal with Iran, and it refuses to normalize its relations with Israel before solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Kuwait also has played an important mediation role in both the Gulf crisis and the Yemen war. It also works closely with the international community to stabilize Iraq and Syria. These policies most likely will remain the same in the future as they are the outcome of three pillars.

First, almost 30 percent of the Kuwaitis are Shia and most of them are merchants with powerful influence in society and politics. This forces the ruling Sunni family to maintain a neutral policy towards Iran in order to secure the allegiance of the Shia community in their own country.

Second, Kuwait has a vibrant civil society and the parliament plays an important role in bestowing legitimacy on the ruling elites. The Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists and the pan-Arabists enjoy strong support in parliament. These groups are against any normalization with Israel. Taking into consideration its own history in supporting the Palestinians, the composition of its society and the power of the opposition, AlSabah family will not yield to the U.S. pressure of normalizing the relations with Israel. In fact, when president Trump declared on September 19<sup>th</sup> after his meeting with the eldest son of the Emir that Kuwait might be the next Arab country to normalize relations with Israel, the biggest newspaper in Kuwait, [Alqabas](#), reported on Kuwait officials that "our position from Israel has not changed and we will be the last country to do normalization."

Third, Kuwait understands the meaning of war. The Iraqi occupation to Kuwait in 1990 has destroyed the country and led the ruling family to flee Kuwait. Therefore, while the ruling family appreciates Saudi and US support to restore their power in 1991, they are not in favor of any military escalation in the Gulf region.

Accordingly, and despite media reports about efforts from neighbouring countries, changing Kuwait's foreign policy is not at the center stage of the competition between the different centers within the ruling family. Further, the main priority for the new Emir, Nawaf, as he [declared](#) before the parliament, is to "maintain national unity, security and stability." Changing Kuwait's foreign policy will not serve his purpose.

## Conclusions

The demise of Sheikh Sabah Salem AlSabah will certainly increase the competition between the power centers within the ruling family, especially that current crown prince and new Emir Sheikh Nawaf is old and sick. However, the competition will be over the post of the new crown prince; rather than that of the Emir. Sheikh Nawaf will have to choose a crown prince within a year from being the new Emir of the country. Whether he is going to make his choice now or postpone it until after the parliamentary elections depends on whom he has

in mind as a successor. In any case, it is unlikely that the competition within the ruling family over who is going to be the new crown prince will affect Kuwait's foreign policy.

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