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**King-making amid the Gulf Crisis
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Introduction

The 2017 Gulf crisis has presented the most serious challenge to the cohesion of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since its foundation in 1981. Preserving internal welfare and progress were the major elements behind the formation of a regional community in the Arabian Peninsula. The domestic stability and welfare of member states have a direct impact on regional security in the GCC region.

Unable to fix the ever-burgeoning regional disorder that has persisted in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the GCC now faces the more acute issue of domestic consolidation. The challenges of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic have rendered the gargantuan task of transforming the clientelist economies in the GCC region into a pipe dream, while the flux in the international order without U.S. direction or leadership has further unnerved the quest for regional stability.

The Gulf crisis, which achieved a partial resolution at the Al-Ula Summit in January 2021, has redefined the survival strategies in the succession or king-making processes in the Gulf as well as the nexus of domestic and foreign policy in the region. The course of the four-year crisis has witnessed three succession processes, in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait. In turn, the intractability of the Gulf crisis has proven a direct threat to the new leaders in Kuwait and Oman due to their priority to preserve the neutral or isolationist orientation in

the crisis. Additionally, it has also threatened the Saudi search for conformity and hegemony in the GCC vis-à-vis the new international context, in particular, with the Biden administration in the United States.

The self-proclaimed Quartet's (i.e., Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt) last-minute attempt to de-escalate tensions in order to find a partial resolution to the conflict is thus intertwined with these countries' struggles for consolidating and preserving their domestic hold on power under monarchical rulers.

The Kuwaiti and Omani Trajectories

Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah passed away on September 29, 2020 after ruling Kuwait for 14 years and serving as the country's foreign minister for 40 years. Emir Sabah earned an international reputation as a respected mediator through his moderating role in various crises from Iraq to the Gulf crises and from Yemen to the Iran-Saudi confrontation. His successor and half-brother, Emir Nawaf, has since undertaken the task of maintaining stability at home and protecting the country's mediating role vis-à-vis domestic and external challenges. The next in the line of succession, Meshaal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, who has an extensive security background within the state apparatus, is set to follow the present emir.

Similarly, Sultan Qaboos bin Said had ruled Oman since 1970 after overthrowing his father. He enjoyed

widespread popularity while in power. His handpicked successor, Sultan Haitham bin Tareq, now must face the challenging tasks of ensuring stability, progress, and economic reforms. The greatest challenge of these is preserving Oman's traditionally neutral role in the region against the power struggles in neighboring countries such as Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. In an unprecedented move he appointed his elder son, Dhi Yazan bin Haitham, a former diplomat and current Minister of Culture and Youth, as the crown prince.

Kuwait and Oman both face severe economic crises that have been aggravated by the pandemic and deficits in their state budgets due to the drop in oil prices. In terms of domestic politics, Kuwait has the most effective and vocal parliament in the region and conducted a successful election in December 2020 that chose a new parliament and form of government. However, lawmakers' attempts to bring reform ended in a political deadlock and with the resignation of the elected prime minister. This political impasse may result in the dissolution of parliament and renewal of elections in the coming months. In terms of preserving the current regional equilibrium, the Kuwaiti role in current GCC mediation indicates that the new emir and his heir apparent are capable of taking on the former emir's tasks.

Sultan Haitham currently faces the domestic challenge of convincing Omanis to follow a series of painful economic policy changes in order to reverse the downward course of the economy. He has reorganized the administration, opening up venues for decentralization and consolidation of

state ministries. His appointment of an heir apparent is part of his reform agenda, which aims to ensure greater predictability in the Omani political arena. It is only a matter of time to see whether or not he will be able to implement the necessary reforms and open up the political space to make room for a more representative system.

The Saudi Trajectory

Among these three Gulf states, Saudi Arabia faces the most severe legitimacy crisis in its succession process. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia's King Salman removed his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef as heir apparent and named his son Mohammed bin Salman, known as MbS, as the crown prince. MbS earned initial credit from Western leaders for reforms like lifting the ban on women driving and attempts at diversifying the Saudi economy. However, Western eyes soon took note of the massive crackdown he had been launching against his perceived opponents, which he claimed were acting on behalf of "foreign parties" against the Kingdom's security.

There is a heavy list of criticisms against MbS ranging from the abovementioned domestic crackdown to pursuing a war in Yemen amid a worsening humanitarian crisis as well as starting an unravelling diplomatic rift with Qatar. There was even a period preceding the suppression of the opposition to replace him as the heir apparent in Saudi Arabia. The peak point at which he lost support and legitimacy at the international level, however, came after allegations that he was behind

Saudi agents' brutal killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Although MbS has denied any involvement in the murder, this incident cast a shadow over his reign and left a permanent stain on his image as an emerging statesman in particular and the Saudi state brand in general.

The Al-Ula Summit represented a renewed attempt to restore MbS's reputation, both as the leader of the GCC and a responsible international interlocutor. He personally welcomed the respective GCC heads of each delegation, including the Qatari Amir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and led the summit in the absence of King Salman. As such, he portrayed himself as a force for good in ensuring Gulf solidarity and stability as well as overcoming his personal distaste for leading a common cause, i.e., much-awaited Saudi pragmatism.

Succession beyond the Gulf Crisis

The partial resolution of the Gulf crisis was broadly construed as an attempt to adjust to the upcoming Biden administration in the United States. Amid the U.S. call to reinvigorate its nuclear pact with Iran, the resolution of the crisis has been understood as a way for the GCC to appear stronger as brothers-in-arms against the Iranian threat. While this evaluation of the GCC's foreign policy is largely valid, it overlooks the fact that the GCC, in particular Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman, are simultaneously undergoing processes of domestic consolidation. Although there has been unprecedented preparation for ensuring political certainty in regard to the political

succession processes, with the new generation taking the helm (including Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani in Qatar and in the UAE with the de facto rule of Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ)), the GCC countries are still readying themselves for responding to the underlying socio-economic, technological, and geopolitical challenges. It would be advantageous for states to take the first steps toward stability at home before the urgency of any additional regional crises crowds out domestic reforms. Thus, leaving the Gulf crisis behind and reintegrating Qatar back into the regional fold is a positive step forward that will not only reinvigorate regional security but also create additional ground for standing against the domestic and international challenges lying ahead of Gulf leaders.

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