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TRANSITIONING POWER

EXPLORING CANDIDATE SELECTION AND LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION IN THE PERSIAN GULF MONARCHIES

ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to determine the degree of institutionalization of and the processes that are in place for the selection of a candidate for the highest office of the state in the Persian Gulf monarchies. The research is based on qualitative methods, including analyses of legal acts and available data from six countries in the region: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The authors propose a new and comparative approach to the study of candidate selection and succession in the Persian Gulf states by creating and verifying a theoretical model of candidate selection and a scale of inclusiveness. In the course of the analyses, a hypothesis was positively verified, which assumed that the selection of candidates for the crown prince is a process with a low degree of institutionalization, and the decision to choose the successor to the monarch/president belongs to a narrow circle of the ruling family. The degree of inclusiveness of the selectorate in the process of selecting a candidate or leader varies in individual countries, although a model granting competence to the ruler or his closest family predominates.

Keywords: candidate selection, leadership succession, Gulf monarchies, selectorate, ruling families, political institutionalization, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

INTRODUCTION

Succession to the throne in the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf has been the subject of many academic studies.¹ Defining the specifics of the ruler's selection and the mechanisms that shape the process of throne inheritance helps us to understand the hierarchy and power structure in the analyzed countries, as well as political struggles and their impact on the region.² Contemporary academic works indicate that regional monarchies have been modifying their succession solutions to maintain state stability and keep the current leaders/ruling families in power.³ Although the issue of succession is becoming increasingly important, there is still a noticeable lack of precise legal regulations,⁴ and presumed lines of succession until recently favored the principle of primogeniture, that is, the throne passing to the eldest son.⁵ Institutionalizing these rules and adhering to them is a priority for the next generation of princes, who will determine the continuity of their dynasties in power and the unity of the state.⁶

The selection of a successor by the reigning ruler and their mutual relationship is a crucial issue affecting the functioning of (non-democratic) states, which can be termed the *crown prince problem*.⁷ The accumulation of power by the successor and the oversight of this process by the leader lead to dilemmas related to the ultimate transfer of power.⁸ However, the increasing prominence of the heir can be beneficial for both parties. The successor's growing power can help secure the position

¹ A. Billingsley, *Political Succession in the Arab World: Constitutions, Family Loyalties and Islam*, New York 2010; A. Bligh, *From Prince to King: Royal Succession in the House of Saud in the Twentieth Century*, New York 1984; S. Henderson, "After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia," *Washington Institute Policy Papers*, no. 37 (1994); J.A. Kechichian, *Succession in Saudi Arabia*, New York 2001; J.A. Kechichian, *Power and Succession in Arab Monarchies: A Reference Guide*, Boulder 2008; A.R. Kelidar, "The Problem of Succession in Saudi Arabia," *Asian Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1978), pp. 23-30; J.E. Peterson, "The Nature of Succession in the Gulf," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2001), pp. 580-601.

² M.E. Ahrari, "Political Succession in Saudi Arabia: Systemic Stability and Security Implications," *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1999), pp. 13-29.

³ R.E. Lucas, "Rules and Tools of Succession in the Gulf Monarchies," *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2012), pp. 75-91.

⁴ K.S. Diwan, *New Generation Royals and Succession Dynamics in the Gulf States*, Washington, DC 2017; A. Khalaf, "Rules of Succession and Political Participation in the GCC States," in A. Khalaf, G. Luciani (eds), *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, Dubai 2006, pp. 33-50.

⁵ J.E. Peterson, "The Nature of Succession..."

⁶ S. Stenslie, *Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia: The Challenge of Succession*, London 2011; S. Stenslie, "Salman's Succession: Challenges to Stability in Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2016), pp. 117-138.

⁷ J.H. Herz, "The Problem of Successorship in Dictatorial Régimes: A Study in Comparative Law and Institutions," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1952), pp. 19-40.

⁸ C. Zhou, "Last step to the throne: The conflict between rulers and their successors," *Political Science Research and Methods*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2023), pp. 80-94.

of the reigning leader, eliminate other rivals, and facilitate the planned transfer of power.⁹

The authors propose a new and original approach to the study of candidate selection and succession in the Persian Gulf states in three aspects. The first approach involves the application and adaptation of the candidate selection theory developed based on the experiences of democratic states. The second approach includes the verification of the theoretical model used for analyzing candidate selection in the monarchies of the Gulf. The third approach uses a problem-oriented narrative and a comparative analysis of all the states. Previous research has employed the term 'succession' and considered the entire process without formulating and verifying a model of the selection process itself. The application of terminology and candidate selection theory to the Gulf states allows for an in-depth and new perspective on the topic.

Theory of candidate selection in democratic countries is not uniform and cannot be transferred to the context of the Gulf monarchies without constructive criticism and adaptation of its key elements. However, the phrase 'The Secret Garden of Politics', coined by Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh in 1988,¹⁰ perfectly captures the essence of the selection process in the countries of the analyzed subregion.¹¹ In the main research stream, this issue most often pertains to intra-party selection processes, but it can successfully be applied to the selection of candidates for the highest office in the state.¹²

In striving to understand the mechanisms of candidate selection, it is important to note that it involves a process where a pretender is chosen from a broader pool of potential candidates.¹³ Therefore, two concepts hold particular significance in the analysis: candidacy and selectorate. These concepts address key dilemmas in the selection process, namely who can become a pretender and who makes a selection. This approach

⁹ K.A. Konrad, V.-L. Mui, "The Prince – or Better No Prince? The Strategic Value of Appointing a Successor," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 61, no. 10 (2017), pp. 2158-2182.

¹⁰ M. Gallagher, M. Marsh (eds), *Candidate Selection in Comparative Perspective: The Secret Garden of Politics*, London–Newbury Park–New Delhi–Beverly Hills 1988.

¹¹ A. Ranney, *Pathways to Parliament. Candidate Selection in Britain*, Madison 1965. The authors are aware that many decisions and actions regarding succession in Arab monarchies are made behind closed doors, and the selection of the heir to the throne often occurs outside the main political stage (within the circle of the most important members of the royal family). Many of these decisions are not codified and formalized, and even if a king's decision (such as that of Saudi King Abdullah, for example) is announced as unchangeable by anyone, it may still change over time. This creates a narrative that justifies the power's ad hoc actions, such as the desire to prevent conflicts within the royal family. Such informal actions pose a significant obstacle to formulating absolute conclusions about succession mechanisms.

¹² A. Ranney, "Candidate Selection," in V. Bogdanor (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Institutions*, Oxford–New York 1987; M. Marsh, "Candidate Selection," in R. Rose (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Elections*, Washington, DC 2000; S. Ashiagbor, *Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives: Selecting Candidates for Legislative Office*, Washington 2008.

¹³ P. Siavelis, S. Morgenstern, "Political Recruitment and Candidate Selection in Latin America: A Framework for Analysis," in P. Siavelis, S. Morgenstern (eds), *Pathways to Power. Political Recruitment and Candidate Selection in Latin America*, University Park, PA 2008, pp. 3-38.

not only allows for a description of the process, but also enables the classification of various solutions along the axes of inclusiveness and centralization, by identifying the body responsible for selecting the pretender.¹⁴

Thus, the aim of this paper is to determine the degree of institutionalization and procedures governing the selection of candidates for the highest office in the state. To achieve this objective, the authors formulated a hypothesis stating that candidate selection (for the crown prince) is a process with a low degree of institutionalization, and decisions regarding the successor to the monarch/president belong to a small circle of the ruler's family. This assertion is based on the historical course of successions and the rules that describe them.

To verify this hypothesis, the authors formulated the following research questions: (1) Is there a dominant model for the selection of political leadership candidates in the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf? (2) What are the similarities and differences in the selection processes in the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf? (3) Has the succession proceeded according to plan?

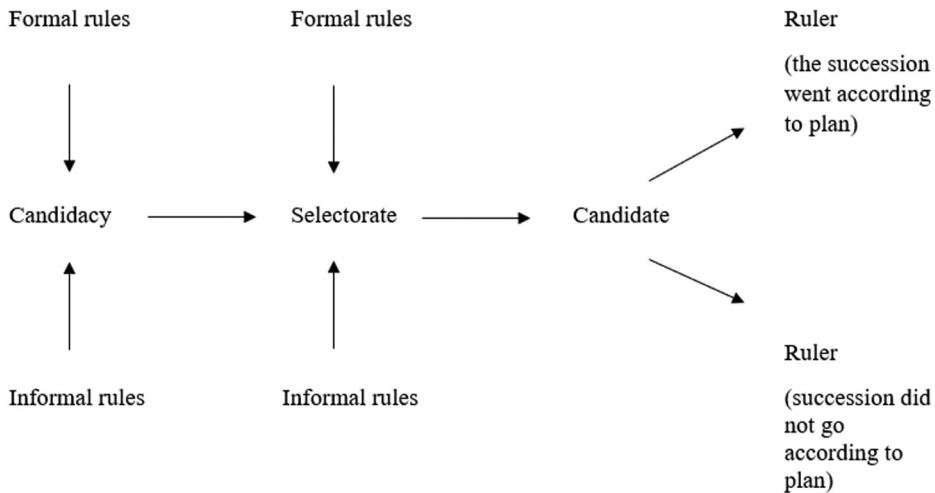
An in-depth analysis will ultimately verify the research hypothesis. The conducted research was based on qualitative methods, with particular emphasis on existing data. An important source was the legal acts regulating the nomination of candidates and the manner of transferring power. The analysis covers the six Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf that comprise the membership of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Arabic: *Majlis at-Ta'awun li-Duwal al-Khalij al-'Arabiyya*: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. It focuses on the succession process at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. During this period, there were several changes in the position of monarch/president: twice in Saudi Arabia (2005 and 2015), once in Qatar (2013), four times in Kuwait (2006, 2006, 2020, and 2023), once in Oman (2020), and twice in the UAE (2004 and 2022). The exception is Bahrain, where the last succession took place in 1999.

As a result of the analysis, the authors developed a theoretical model of power succession applicable to the studied states. This model distinguishes between the candidate selection process and the succession process of the king/emir/sultan/president. It

¹⁴ A. Ranney, "Candidate Selection," in D. Butler, H.R. Penniman, A. Ranney (eds), *Democracy at the Pools: A Comparative Study of Competitive National Elections*, Washington–London 2017; M. Gallagher, "Introduction," in M. Gallagher, M. Marsh (eds), *Candidate Selection...*, pp. 1-19; L. Bille, "Democratizing a Democratic Procedure: Myth or Reality?: Candidate Selection in Western European Parties, 1960-1990," *Party Politics*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2001), pp. 363-380; K. Lundell, "Determinants of Candidate Selection: The Degree of Centralization in Comparative Perspective," *Party Politics*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2004), pp. 25-47; R.Y. Hazan, G. Voerman, "Electoral systems and candidate selection," *Acta Politica*, vol. 41, (2006), pp. 146-162; G. Rahat, "Which Candidate Selection Method is the Most Democratic?," *Government and Opposition*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2009), pp. 68-90; R.Y. Hazan, G. Rahat, *Democracy within Parties: Candidate Selection Methods and Their Political Consequences*, Oxford 2010; W. Cross, A. Gauja, "Designing Candidate Selection Methods: Exploring Diversity in Australian Political Parties," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 49, no. 1 (2014), pp. 22-39; N. Aylott, "A Question of Priorities: Candidate Selection in Estonian Political Parties," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2014), pp. 321-344.

highlights that the selection of a candidate is equally significant scientifically, yet remains poorly researched. In the candidate selection process, the authors focus on three key aspects: (1) analysis of formal and informal requirements imposed on the group of candidates; (2) determination of the inclusiveness of the selectorate responsible for selecting the aspirant; and (3) the procedure on which the selection is based and the decision-making process.

Figure 1. Model of candidate selection in the Persian Gulf monarchies



The above model emphasizes that the candidate selection process in the Gulf states is determined by both formal and informal political processes, primarily within the inner circle of the ruling family. According to this model, there are three stages/aspects of ascending to power. The first stage involves defining the formal candidacy requirements. The second stage is identifying the selectorate, the body responsible for choosing the candidate. Only in the third step of the analysis can we determine who the official candidate in the succession process is. Additionally, it is essential to focus on the final and most critical stage/aspect: the transfer of power and conducting the succession according to the ruler's plan/intention.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first part (already described) presents the rationale for the research, the main objectives, and the theoretical assumptions, including the proposed selection model for the studied states. The second part analyzes formal rules for transferring power, including the process of selecting a candidate for the ruler and the involvement of various institutions at this stage, and the subsequent selection of the actual monarch. The third part presents case studies of leadership changes according to the adopted selection model. In the final part, the authors address the research questions, verify the hypothesis, and present their conclusions.

FORMAL CONDITIONS FOR CANDIDATE SELECTION AND LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

Candidacy (who can formally become a candidate/crown prince)

The first step to gaining power is meeting formal requirements imposed on potential candidates. These requirements are confirmed in the constitutions of the Arab monarchies.¹⁵ Thus, a candidate for the throne must be: (1) a male descendant of the family/lineage; and (2) a member of the ruling family. This can include both the son and the brother of the reigning monarch/president. Furthermore, there are no other formal requirements, such as age (except in Kuwait, where the candidate must be at least 18 years old) or experience in other positions.¹⁶ Additional formal requirements, such as taking an oath of loyalty to the king, apply only to the chosen successor.

The constitutions of the Arab monarchies specify the dynasties entitled to hold power in the state. They indicate that power is transferred within the ruling dynasty, where it is determined that authority can be inherited by the descendants of:¹⁷

- The founder and first king of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz Ibn Saud (1932-1953) – both vertically and horizontally within the lineage. Despite the large number of dynasty members, the contenders for the throne usually come from a small group;
- Emir of Qatar, Hamad Ibn Khalifa Al Thani (1995-2013);
- Sultan of Oman, Turki Ibn Said (1874-1888);
- Ruler of Bahrain, Sheikh Isa Ibn Ali Al Khalifa (1869-1932);
- Ruler of the Sheikhdom of Kuwait, Mubarak Al-Sabah (1896-1915).

An exception among the five monarchies is the UAE, where the president and vice president are elected by the Federal Supreme Council (Arabic: Al-Majlis al-A'la li-al-Ittihad) from among its members. In this context, a certain tradition has been adopted, whereby the president is always from the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, governed by the House of Nahyan since 1793, while the vice president (who is also the prime minister) is from the ruling family of Dubai, governed by the Al Maktoum family since 1833. According to the constitution, the term of office for both these bodies is five years, but the possibility of re-election is also provided for, and is consistently

¹⁵ Not all countries designate their highest legal act as a 'constitution'. For example, in Saudi Arabia, it is called the 'Basic Law of Governance', and in Oman, it is the 'Basic Statute of the State'.

¹⁶ However, in the practice and political tradition of Arab monarchies, before a son/brother is declared crown prince, they are often prepared for future leadership by assuming important political/military/diplomatic/administrative positions, which allow them to gain experience and leadership skills. Here are a few examples: Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Ibn Salman was appointed Minister of Defence in 2015 before being declared crown prince in 2017; Crown Prince Tamim Ibn Hamad Al Thani, the current Emir of Qatar since 2003 when he was appointed crown prince, also held the position of Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Qatari Armed Forces; Crown Prince Haitham Ibn Tariq al-Said, the current Sultan of Oman, before becoming ruler, served as Minister of Culture and National Heritage, as well as Chairman of the Oman Olympic Committee.

¹⁷ A. Khalaf, "Rule of Succession and Political Participation in the GCC States," in A. Khalaf, G. Luciani (eds), *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, Dubai 2006, pp. 33-50.

practiced in the political system.¹⁸ The succession process within the Al Nahyan and Al Maktoum families is not publicly disclosed, but it is known that members of the families select the leaders of Abu Dhabi and Dubai among themselves.

In addition to the constitutions of Arab monarchies, various aspects of the succession process (such as who can become the heir to the throne, minimum age of candidate, which institutions participate in the succession process and what roles they play, and the power inheritance process) are also regulated by special laws (such as the Kuwaiti Succession Law of 1964) or royal decrees (such as the Saudi Decree A/135 of 2006 establishing the Allegiance Council, Hai'at al Bai'a, or the Qatari Decree No. 1/2000 establishing the Ruling Family Council, Arabic: Majlis li-al-A'ila al-Hakima). Constitutions also regulate the order of succession, for example, in Bahrain and Oman, where the principle of agnatic primogeniture applies, and in Qatar, where partial primogeniture is observed.¹⁹

Primogeniture is the principle of inheriting the throne or estate, whereby the first-born child or eldest descendant inherits the entirety or a larger portion of the inheritance, estate, or social position from their parents. In the context of the Gulf monarchies, primogeniture means that the eldest son of the monarch, or another designated heir, automatically inherits the throne upon their death, bypassing other potential candidates such as younger siblings.

Primogeniture exists in Bahrain (agnatic primogeniture, although according to Article 1 of the constitution, the king may choose any son) and in Oman (since 2021, where the eldest son of the Sultan is effectively the crown prince). In other countries, the norm is the selection of the ruler through consensus, necessitating them to seek support among family members. Consequently, their power is not despotic, as their selection depends on others. However, this also creates tensions within royal families. In these countries, succession to the throne does not solely follow a direct line (from father to eldest son/descendant) but also involves brothers, grandchildren, and cousins.

In Qatar, primogeniture is partial – while Qatari succession norms promote transfer of power from father to son, they do not adhere strictly to the principle of primogeniture based solely on the eldest son. The regulations allow the emir to choose the most capable/favored son as the successor. Therefore, succession according to primogeniture is not automatic. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the position of crown prince was taken by one of the youngest sons of the reigning King Salman – Muhammad bin Salman (who assumed the position in 2017 at the age of 32), who is one of the youngest grandsons

¹⁸ *The Constitution of the United Arab Emirates of 18 July 1971*, UAE Legislation, at <https://uaelegislation.gov.ae/en/constitution>, article 52.

¹⁹ The principle of partial primogeniture in Qatar means that when inheriting power and the position of emir (ruler) or a member of the ruling family, the eldest son of the emir is preferred, but not necessarily the eldest son overall. In other words, the choice of successor among the emir's sons may be limited to the eldest son, but it does not have to include him, as the selection can be made from all of the emir's offspring. This principle provides some flexibility in the power inheritance system in Qatar, allowing for some dispersion of the succession line in the absence of a candidate among the elder sons of the emir.

of the kingdom's founder. The son of the kingdom's founder – Prince Muqrin, and the grandson of Ibn Saud – Muhammad Ibn Nayif, were bypassed for the position of crown prince by the reigning King Salman. Primogeniture can also introduce destabilizing dynamics within monarchies, such as when sons are unwilling to wait until the death of their fathers to assume power.

Constitutions also regulate matters related to regency in the event that the monarch is unable to exercise power (or is under 18 years of age, as in Qatar), in which case the crown prince/Regency Council may act as regent (respectively in Saudi Arabia and Oman).

An important provision in constitutions is the procedure for appointing a successor after prior consultation (shura) of the king with other representatives of the ruling family and with 'wise men' in the state (more on this in the subchapter "Approving the Selection of the Crown Prince"), gathered in various types of bodies/councils. This process typically occurs behind closed doors and is confidential, with the final decision usually resting with the king and announced to the public after consultations. In many cases, such councils consist of members of the royal family (e.g., the Saudi Allegiance Council or the Qatari Ruling Family Council). However, for example, in Kuwait, nomination of the crown prince, made by the reigning emir, must be approved by the parliament (National Assembly, Majlis al-Umma).²⁰ Following the nomination, the National Assembly must agree to the choice during a special session. If it does not, the emir nominates at least three potential successors from the ruling family, and the National Assembly swears allegiance to one of them, who then becomes the crown prince. The successor must be of legal age, of sound mind, and a legitimate child of Muslim parents.²¹ The vice-emir takes a similar oath to that described in Article 60 of the emir's oath during a special session of the National Assembly, but adds words of allegiance to the emir.²²

Selectorate (which body and how a candidate/crown prince is chosen)

A pivotal entity in the process of selecting candidates and leaders is the selecting body (selectorate). Its composition and decision-making process profoundly influence the standing of contenders for the throne. Understanding who selects the leader and by what means determines the entire course of this process.

In the analyzed case studies, the bodies involved in the succession process serve the following roles:

1. Endorsing the king's decisions (e.g., the Allegiance Council in Saudi Arabia);
2. Coordinating succession (reporting vacancies, approving a new ruler), and governing the country during the transitional period;

²⁰ *The Constitution of State of Kuwait of 11 November 1962*, media.gov.kw, at https://media.gov.kw/assets/img/Ommah22_Awareness/PDF/Follow_the_information_unit/new/constitution%20-%20English.pdf, article 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, article 4.

²² *Ibid.*, article 63.

3. Choosing the country's leader (the Federal Supreme Council in the UAE, the family council in Kuwait, and until recently, the Family Regency Council in Oman).

Despite the aforementioned functions, the involvement of institutions in the succession process is quite limited (for example, in Bahrain or Oman) because the choice of the crown prince ultimately rests with the reigning king. The existing institutions usually comprise the king's closest relatives, and their role and task are to create the impression that the succession process is collective rather than despotic or individualistic. However, these institutions essentially serve as a facade, providing a forum or platform for discussion and advice on the selection of a candidate/crown prince, but also taking actions (mediation/negotiation) to resolve disputes and conflicts within the family concerning the position of the candidate/crown prince. The facade-like nature of these institutions is determined by the fact that, due to the unquestionable position of the king, they are often under the influence of the reigning monarch/president. An exception in this regard is Kuwait, where the National Assembly actually has the right to remove the emir in Kuwait if he is unable to rule, for example, due to illness (more on this later in the paper).

An example of such an institution is the Allegiance Council in Saudi Arabia, established on 7 December, 2007, by King Abdullah Abdul Aziz (2005-2015). The formation of the Council was an attempt to codify an unwritten custom, whereby the king sought opinions (consultations) regarding the selection of the crown prince from within the royal family (in this sense, the Council served as an additional source of legitimacy for the king's decision). It is worth noting that until 2006, detailed regulations defining the succession process did not exist in Saudi Arabia, which relied on tradition and political agreements. Royal Decree A/135 of 19 October, 2006, formalized the succession procedure and outlined the operating principles of the Allegiance Council.²³ The Council's purpose is to ensure the smooth transfer of power and appoint future crown princes immediately after a new king ascends the throne. The Council includes sons of Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, the founder of the kingdom, his grandsons, as well as sons of the king and the crown prince. In 2024, the Council comprised 34 members.²⁴ In the succession process, the Council selects one of three candidates proposed by the king for the position of crown prince. If the Council rejects all the king's candidates, he can appoint his own candidate. The choice of crown prince will then be determined by a vote within the Council. If the king rejects the committee's candidate, the Council will conduct a vote to choose between the king's candidate and its own nominee. The candidate who receives the majority of votes will be appointed as the crown prince.

The dysfunctionality of the Council is evidenced by the fact that it was not involved in nominations of crown princes – in 2011 for Prince Nayif, and in 2012 for Prince Salman (both were results of the king's decision). During the next nomination in 2013

²³ "Succession Commission Law (Law of Pledge of Allegiance Commission)," *Royal Order (A /135)*, 19 October 2006.

²⁴ 3 surviving sons of Ibn Saud, 30 of his grandsons and 1 of his great grandsons. Each grandson represents his deceased or incapacitated father.

for Prince Muqrin as Deputy Prime Minister (which meant he was second in line to the throne), King Abdullah conducted individual surveys with each member of the Allegiance Council before announcing Muqrin's new title. During the vote in the Allegiance Council on Muqrin's promotion to Deputy Prime Minister, 75% of the council members voted in favor, while 25% voted against.²⁵ On 23 January, 2015, King Abdullah passed away, and his brother Salman ascended to the throne. After Salman took the throne, Muqrin became the main successor to the throne.

Before Abdullah's death, he issued a royal decree (2014), stating that Muqrin's selection as crown prince could not be modified or changed in any way by anyone, including the next King Salman, who might appoint a different successor (which he did). However, after Abdullah's death on 23 January, 2015, King Salman issued a decree (29 April, 2015) revoking Muqrin's position as crown prince, which was unanimously approved by the Allegiance Council, and appointing his nephew Muhammad Ibn Nayif (the first grandson of Ibn Saud) to the position. Muqrin was a candidate of the deceased King Abdullah and was not in the plans of the new King Salman. Salman's son Muhammad bin Salman (MBS) was the candidate for the throne. He was appointed Minister of Defence, Secretary-General of the Royal Court, and Chairman of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs. On 21 June, 2017, Muhammad bin Nayef was removed from the position of crown prince, and MBS was announced as the new successor to the throne.²⁶ Both decisions by King Salman were approved by the Allegiance Council, thereby earning the label 'royal rubber stamp', endorsing everything according to the will of the reigning king. This way, King Salman handed over power to a new generation of Saudis (the grandchildren of the kingdom's founder), prioritizing the interests of the family and the country above all and stifling any competition for the throne in its infancy, ensuring a clear and swift appointment of the successor to the throne.

A similar institution in Qatar plays a more mysterious role – the Ruling Family Council (Arabic: Majlis li-al-A'ila al-Hakima). It is mysterious because apart from the official records in the Constitution of Qatar, little is known about its functions and operation. Moreover, the proceedings of this and similar collegial bodies in the Gulf monarchies are not public. The Council was established by Emir Hamad Ibn Khalifa Al Thani's decree in 2000, and its members include the closest relatives of the emir. According to the Qatari constitution, the Council determines the vacancy in the position of the emir in the case of his death or total incapacity to perform his functions. Then, jointly with the Council of Ministers and the Shura Council (Consultative Assembly), after a secret session, they proclaim the successor to the throne as the new ruler (Constitution of Qatar, Art. 14-15). The Council also plays an important role when

²⁵ Y. Guzansky, "A Game of Thrones: Royal Succession in Saudi Arabia," *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2015), p. 10.

²⁶ According to reports from *The New York Times*, Muhammad bin Nayif was forced to abdicate and has since been under house arrest. Furthermore, on 6 March, 2020, Muhammad bin Nayif was arrested and charged with treason. Saudi authorities have prohibited the prince's doctor and closest family from visiting him.

the successor to the throne becomes emir at the age of less than 18.²⁷ In such cases, it appoints individuals to the temporary governance of the Regency Council, which consists of a chairman and three-five members, with the chairman and the majority of members being from the royal family.²⁸

Another example of such an institution is the Federal Supreme Council (FSC) in the UAE. According to Article 46 of the constitution, it is the highest executive and consultative body (the aforementioned institutions mainly serve advisory functions), consisting of the leaders of the seven emirates. Each of them has one vote during voting. Decisions are made by a majority of votes, but among the five votes, the votes of Abu Dhabi and Dubai must be included. According to Article 51 of the FSC constitution, the FSC elects the president and vice president from among its members. The newly elected president and his deputy take an oath before the FSC.

Since the Council consists of ruling emirs and there is consensus among them regarding the choice of president and prime minister, it can be considered an institution dependent on the ruling families and possessing functions of approving their decisions rather than verifying or changing them. According to the prevailing tradition in the UAE, the president is invariably the ruler of Abu Dhabi from the Al Nahyan family, while his deputy (and concurrently the prime minister) is the ruler of Dubai from the Al Maktoum family. Therefore, despite decentralized authority and seven different ruling families, power is still wielded by two male members of two royal families, which is often referred to as a neo-patrimonial hybrid system (federalism with two ruling families).²⁹

In Kuwait, an important yet publicly concealed role in selecting the crown prince is played by the elders of individual tribes, led by the emir (upon assuming office, he has a year to choose the crown prince). According to tradition, the ruler must consider the stance of family members who select a candidate of legal age (the youngest was chosen in 1966, then 40-year-old Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah). Behind-the-scenes negotiations and the need for consensus increase the likelihood of selecting a candidate widely accepted, moderate, and capable of building coalitions. This, in turn, is intended to reduce the risk of a power crisis.³⁰

Since 2006, the unicameral National Assembly (Majlis al-Umma al-Kuwayti), which has comparatively broad powers among the Gulf monarchies, has significantly increased its role in this matter.³¹ According to Kuwaiti law, the parliament approves

²⁷ In the history of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, there have been situations where a young ruler took power. In Bahrain, in 1961, power was assumed by 19-year-old Sheikh Isa Ibn Salman Al Khalifa, who held office until 1999. In 1953, at the age of 21, Sheikh Su'ud Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Su'ud became the king of Saudi Arabia and ruled until 1964.

²⁸ *The Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar of 9 April 2004*, Government Communications Office, at [permanent_constitution_state_qatar_en.pdf](#), articles 12-16.

²⁹ Ch.M. Davidson, "The United Arab Emirates Prospects for Political Reform," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2009), pp. 117-127.

³⁰ C.L. Tatar, "The Emirate of Kuwait Challenged by Succession," *Observatoire of Arab-Muslim World and Sabel*, 28 September 2018, pp. 1-11.

³¹ H.H. Albloshi, "Kuwait's National Assembly: Roles and Dynamics," *The Shura Councils in the Persian Gulf*, no. 1 (July 2019), p. 17.

the crown prince candidate through a majority vote. If obtaining the required vote of confidence fails, the emir is obliged to nominate three candidates, from which the parliament selects one crown prince. In 2006, the National Assembly removed 76-year-old Emir Sa'd al-'Abd Allah al-Sabah from office due to poor health. However, the emir still holds significant leverage over the parliament, as under Article 107 of the constitution, he has the right to dissolve it by decree if deemed necessary.³² He has exercised this right quite frequently (there were 10 such instances between 1975 and 2016, and subsequently in 2016, 2022, 2023, and 2024. Three times, namely in 1976, 1986, and 2024, the ruler simultaneously suspended the constitution).³³

Furthermore, Kuwait's constitution (Article 4) stipulates that any new crown prince must be approved by a parliamentary majority. Out of 66 parliamentarians, 16 are appointed by the emir, while 50 are elected through general elections, meaning that a king candidate must maintain strong relations with members of the National Assembly. Parliamentarians appointed by the emir supplement the elected members of parliament, aiming to preserve balance and representativeness within the legislative institution.

The strongest electoral prerogatives among the institutions discussed so far were held until recently by the Royal Family Council (Majlis al-A'ila al-Malika) in Oman. Traditionally, it comprised the closest/trusted members of the sultan's family and influential Omani politicians. Article 6 of the Basic Statute of Oman from 1996 granted it the right to select a new sultan no later than three days after the position became vacant. The same article stated that if the Royal Family Council failed to reach an agreement, a special group would be appointed ("the Defence Council together with the Chairman of Majlis Al Dawla, the Chairman of Majlis Al Shura, and the Chairman of the Supreme Court along with two of his most senior deputies"), which would designate the successor.³⁴

However, Sultan Qaboos (1970-2020), who himself seized power in 1970 with British assistance by overthrowing his father, did not publicly announce a successor to the throne. A factor increasing uncertainty about the successor was the fact that the Sultan had no children or brothers, making succession more challenging. As a consequence, in Oman, where people *don't talk about it (succession)* because it would *right away create division and the power struggle*,³⁵ difficulties were anticipated, including the renewal of tribal disputes and rivalries. Only Sultan Qaboos's successor, thus chosen in

³² L.Y. Sean, "Will Kuwait's Next Parliament Be Its Last?," *Journal of Democracy*, March 2024, at <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/will-kuwaits-next-parliament-be-its-last>, 21 May 2024.

³³ The decree can be annulled by the Supreme Court. This was the case in March 2023, when as a result of the ruling, the parliament's term was restored, and the results of the September 2022 elections were annulled. The consequence of such actions is a permanent political crisis in Kuwait, which prevents reforms, including economic ones, from being carried out.

³⁴ "Royal Decree no. (101/96) Promulgating the Basic Statute of the State," *Oman: Basic Law*, 6 November 1996, at <https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/1996/147120>, 3 February 2026.

³⁵ M. Dokoupil, "Succession Question Fuels Uncertainty in Oman," *Reuters*, 24 May 2012, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oman-succession/succession-question-fuels-uncertainty-in-oman-idUSBRE84N0K420120524/>, 3 February 2026.

2020 by the Royal Family Council, 65-year-old Haitham bin Tariq, amended the basic law, introducing the position of crown prince. Consequently, the Royal Family Council lost its key prerogative, although the institution remained – it is now responsible for appointing a regency council, which will govern if the new sultan is under 21 years old.³⁶

In Bahrain, there are no collegial bodies involved in this process. This also applies to the parliament, whose authority is highly limited, particularly since the crisis resulting from the Arab Spring. The role of political groupings, including Shi‘a, who constitute a significant proportion of the population,³⁷ is primarily confined to contestation and the exertion of pressure rather than to classical forms of power-sharing or co-governance. At most, these groups serve as channels for the articulation of structural social frustrations, while their capacity to influence political outcomes is limited to such actions as boycotting parliamentary sessions or votes, attempting to block decisions, or publicly criticizing policy directions.

Following the Arab Spring, the internal political crisis, and perceived threats related to Iranian influence, the ability of political parties to affect the political process has diminished even further. This is particularly evident in the case of succession, which remains the exclusive prerogative of the royal family. Neither the parliament nor political parties play any direct role in this process. Nevertheless, it can be argued that prior to these developments, most notably before the dissolution in 2016 of the main Shi‘a opposition party Al-Wefaq (Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society),³⁸ there existed a degree of very remote influence, not with regard to who would become the new ruler, but rather concerning the political program he should represent and the style of governance he should adopt in order to enhance the social legitimacy of his rule.

In other words, the system of succession by family consensus is the glue that holds the dynastic monarchies together, and that glue is missing in Bahrain.³⁹ As mentioned earlier, the country operates under the rule of agnatic primogeniture, which existed even before the introduction of the constitution in 1973. The crown prince is chosen by the monarch, and he has complete discretion – according to the constitution, he can choose any of his sons (Article 1). Such situations have occurred several times, for example, in 2019 when King Hamad appointed his son Muhammad bin Hamad Al-Khalifa as Crown Prince, even though he had older brothers, or in 2008 when Sheikh

³⁶ “Royal Decree 6/2021 Issuing The Basic Statute of the State,” *Constitution of Oman (Basic Statute of the State of Oman)*, 11 January 2021, at <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natleg-bod/2021/101716> 3 February 2026.

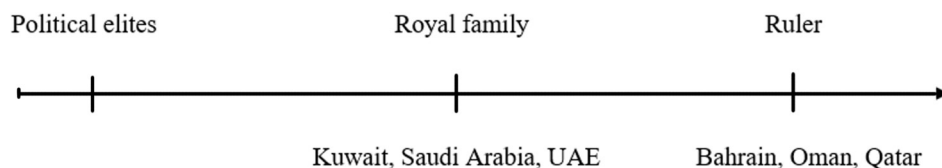
³⁷ D. Pollock, “Sunnis and Shia in Bahrain: New Survey Shows Both Conflict and Consensus,” *Washington Institute Policy Analysis*, 20 November 2017, at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sunnis-and-shia-bahrain-new-survey-shows-both-conflict-and-consensus>, 3 February 2026.

³⁸ “Bahrain Dissolves Main Shia Opposition Al-Wefaq Party: Manama Dissolves Main Shia Opposition Group Al-Wefaq, Accusing It of Fostering Violence in the Island Kingdom,” *Aljazeera*, 17 July 2016, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/7/17/bahrain-dissolves-main-shia-opposition-al-wefaq-party>, 3 February 2026.

³⁹ M. Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies*, New York 1999.

Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa appointed his son Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa as crown prince, despite having an older brother.

Figure 2. Inclusiveness of selectorate – candidate selection



The above figure shows the inclusivity of the selectorate for the crown prince candidate (Figure 2), within which two centers are deciding the candidate's selection. The dominant model assumes influence, to varying degrees and extents, of a narrow circle of the royal family (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE). In the second case, it is the reigning ruler who makes the decision (Bahrain, Qatar, Oman). This is particularly evident in Bahrain, where the reigning ruler holds full prerogatives in selecting the crown prince.

Leader (which institution selects and how the ruler is elected)

Now that we know who can be a candidate for leader and which organ of the state decides on the selection, it is worth moving on to the key issue of ruler designation. The process itself seems to be much easier, or more automatic, than indicating a candidate. While the latter often results in – as previously demonstrated – friction, rivalry, and conflicting interests, the former, the actual selection of the ruler at the time of succession, generally does not pose such challenges.

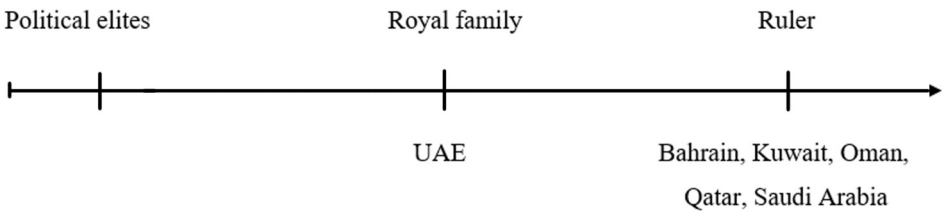
A key factor increasing the likelihood of a peaceful transition of power at the moment of succession is the fact that the designated successor identified in the selection process is the natural/sole candidate to assume power, and their position as the heir is entrenched in legal provisions. The individual destined to take the highest office does not need to meet any additional requirements or seek approval. In most of the analyzed monarchies, there are legal regulations whereby the incumbent ruler designates the heir to the throne. An example of such a situation is the dispute over the succession to the throne in Kuwait between the ruler and the parliament, where despite this, the process of changing the monarch can be considered somewhat automatic. When an emir dies, their place is taken by the crown prince (friction arises in the choice of the crown prince). The same applies in Bahrain and Oman, where the choice of ruler involves administering the oath to the crown prince.

A key formal requirement in the succession process is the provision in the constitutions of Arab states that the successor to the throne is designated by the incumbent king after consultation with advisory bodies or succession councils established for this purpose, typically remaining under the control of the king. Such a provision can be found

in the constitutions of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman. In the UAE, there is a custom whereby the president is the ruler of Abu Dhabi, and their deputy is the ruler of Dubai.

We are thus dealing with a low degree of inclusiveness of the selectorate in the case of the future ruler (Figure 3). The decision-making body for choosing the leader is the Federal Supreme Council (UAE) or the current leader, who may precede their decision with consultations with advisory bodies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait).

Figure 3. Inclusiveness of selectorate – leadership (ruler) selection



From a comparative perspective on the process of selecting candidates and leaders (Table 1), differences and similarities in the analyzed aspects become apparent. The formal requirements for potential candidates to the throne are clear: only descendants of a specific lineage can be considered. Regarding the body that selects the candidate, there is an equal division into two groups. On the one hand, the candidate is designated by the royal family in various configurations and with the involvement of the incumbent ruler (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait). On the other hand, the selection is made solely by the incumbent ruler (Qatar, Bahrain, Oman). As for the selection of the leader, a collective decision is made only in the UAE, where the responsibility rests with the Federal Supreme Council. In other cases, the incumbent ruler makes the decision, or the crown prince succeeds the throne upon the ruler’s death.

Table 1. From candidate to ruler in the Persian Gulf

	Ruler	Candidacy (who can become a candidate)	Selectorate of the candidate (who selects the candidate)	Selectorate of the ruler (who selects the leader)
Saudi Arabia	The King of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Malik al-Mam- laka al-‘Arabiyya as-Su‘udiyah)	Descendants of the founder and first king of Saudi Arabia, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Su‘ud (1932-1953) - in both the vertical and horizontal lines	The candidate is chosen by the king after con- sultation with the Allegiance Council	King

	Ruler	Candidacy (who can become a candidate)	Selectorate of the candidate (who selects the candidate)	Selectorate of the ruler (who selects the leader)
UAE	President of the United Arab Emirates (Ra'is Dawlat al-Imarat al-'Arabiyya al-Muttahida)	The ruler (emir) of Abu Dhabi from the Al Nahyan family	The crown prince is appointed by the Federal Supreme Council (traditionally, this is the emir of Abu Dhabi)	Federal Supreme Council (rulers of seven emirates)
Qatar	Emir of the State of Qatar (Amir Dawlat Qaṭar)	Descendants of Emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani	Ruling emir	Emir
Bahrain	King of the Kingdom of Bahrain (Malik Mamlakat al-Bahrayn) - od 2002 r. Previously Emir of the State of Bahrain (Amir Dawlat al-Bahrayn)	A male member of the Al Khalifa family	Ruling king	Crown prince after the king's death
Oman	The Sultan of the Sultanate of Oman (Sultan Saltanat Uman)	A male descendant of Sultan Turki bin Sa'id	Ruling sultan	Crown prince after the sultan's death
Kuwait	The Emir of the State of Kuwait (Amir Dawlat al-Kuwayt)	The male descendant of Sheikh Mubarak al-Sabah	The emir, after consultations with representatives of the family, selects a candidate who must then obtain approval from the National Assembly	Crown prince after the emir's death

SUCCESSION

Based on the above analysis, we can conclude that power has always been passed within the ruling family/dynasty, but not always according to the established order by the elites (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait). In Saudi Arabia, King Salman changed the crown prince to Muhammad bin Nayef – the grandson of Ibn Saud, and two years later to his son Muhammad bin Salman (2017). In Qatar, Sheikh Jassim was replaced by Sheikh Tamim (2003), and in Kuwait, the principle of alternating power between the

Al-Ahmed and Al-Salem branches was violated. These situations illustrate the bypassing of older members of the royal family in favor of younger members, but ultimately did not lead to a paralysis of power. While in Qatar the change occurred bloodlessly based on the decision of the ruling emir (2013), in Saudi Arabia, the succession change led to actions by the new successor, perceived as a strengthening of power (regime-boosting) – the detention of Saudi officials (supporters of the late King Abdullah) at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh and the enforcement of obedience to the change in the position of crown prince (2017-2019). Thus, succession in these countries proceeded according to the plan of the ruling monarch, albeit with minor changes.

In Kuwait, the aforementioned violation of customary rules occurred. The principle of alternating power between two branches of the royal family (Al-Ahmed and Al-Salem) was ignored. The crisis moment occurred in 2006 when a representative of the Al-Salim branch took power from the Al-Ahmed branch, but only for a week (the removal of Emir Saad I due to health reasons). In his place, the emir became the then-prime minister and crown prince Sabah IV from the Al-Ahmed branch.⁴⁰ While legal norms were upheld, there were doubts about the actual reciprocity since Saad I from the Al-Salim branch did not, in practice, wield power. As a result of the violation of informal succession rules, the Al-Ahmed branch strengthened its political position at the expense of the Al-Salim branch, which began to affect future succession processes. In 2020, the Al-Salim branch retained power when the then-crown prince Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the half-brother of the late Sabah IV, became the emir (as Nawaf I). When he passed away in 2023, power was assumed by Mishal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, who was then the crown prince (also known as Mishal I).⁴¹ It can be said that since the crisis, there has also been fragmentation within the royal family and deepening divisions, leading to numerous political crises (changes in the position of the prime minister and several parliamentary dissolutions).

The succession process in Oman proceeded much more calmly, where actions were taken in accordance with the laws in force in 2020 (before changes in 2021). Sultan Qaboos, the longest-serving Arab leader (1970-2020), designated his successor in his will. Therefore, the Royal Family Council did not have to choose the successor themselves but announced Sultan Qaboos's decision to choose his cousin.⁴² The establishment of the position of crown prince and the appointment of the ruler's eldest son allows us to predict that future succession will also proceed according to the planned scheme.

⁴⁰ A.F. Ansary, *The Succession Process in Kuwait: a Brief Overview of the Recent Crisis from a Legal Perspective*, Washington, DC 2006; D.H. Rand, *Roots of the Arab Spring: Contested Authority and Political Change in the Middle East*, Pennsylvania 2013, p. 147.

⁴¹ "Kuwait's New Emir Sheikh Mishal Takes Oath of Office: The New Leader, Seen as a Reformist, Pledged to Adhere to Constitutional Principles and Fight Corruption," *Aljazeera*, 20 December 2023, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/20/kuwaits-new-emir-sheikh-meshal-takes-oath-of-office>, 3 February 2026.

⁴² "Haitham Bin Tariq Sworn in As Oman's New Sultan: The Former Culture Minister Has Been Named As Successor to Late Sultan Qaboos," *Aljazeera*, 11 January 2020, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/11/haitham-bin-tariq-sworn-in-as-omans-new-sultan>, 3 February 2026.

Similarly, in Bahrain, unless unforeseen events occur (illness, coup, or revolution), power will be assumed by Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, the crown prince, who obtained this position as the eldest son of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (who, in turn, was the eldest son of the late Emir, then King, Isa bin Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who died in 1999).

Although the analyzed states have different succession methods, they are all characterized by the fact that they always occur without bloodshed. Frictions are, at most, of a palace nature, not street-level. Changes result from the decisions of the ruling king/president (possibly after consulting institutions overseeing succession, in which close family members often sit, such as the Federal Supreme Council in the UAE) and succession mechanisms, which, although general and leaving room for interpretation (especially regarding oversight institutions), have fulfilled their role. As we have written before, there were usually more than one contender for the throne (e.g., in Qatar or Saudi Arabia).

CONCLUSIONS

Although there are succession mechanisms in Arab monarchies, they do not guarantee a smooth transfer of power. Common problems include: the struggle for the position of crown prince between branches of ruling families (which raises allegations of corruption), the assumption of power by the younger generation as seen in Qatar or Saudi Arabia (which raises concerns about the lack of experience of young leaders), or the use of forceful solutions in power struggles, as witnessed in Saudi Arabia in 2017 by Mohammed bin Salman. These challenges and issues demonstrate that in a region where tradition and experience play a crucial role, dramatic changes in power are possible. If the young leaders of Qatar and Saudi Arabia prove themselves, other Arab monarchies may follow in their footsteps. The Emir of Qatar, Tamim Al Thani, and the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, are convincing in their assurances that their reigns will be enduring, unlike the short-lived reigns of senior family members, which often ended due to serious illness or the death of the monarch. It is worth remembering that Persian Gulf societies are young and also support younger rulers, who often better understand their concerns and aspirations.⁴³ It is also worth noting that rarely is only one candidate considered in the game for the throne.

The conducted analysis has successfully achieved the research goal of determining the degree of institutionalization of the process of selecting candidates and leaders in the Persian Gulf states. The institutions established to support, and sometimes conduct, the succession process in monarchies most often consist of members of the ruling dynasty. Even if it is the emir/king/president/sultan who formally makes the final decision on the successor to the throne, the described institutions can serve advisory,

⁴³ B. Winder, "Next in Line: Succession and the Kuwaiti Monarchy," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 August 2020, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/82471>, 22 April 2024.

stabilizing, and consultative functions, allowing for the consideration of different perspectives and the avoidance of conflicts, thus ensuring political stability.

The hypothesis stated that the selection of candidates for crown prince is a process with a low degree of institutionalization, and the decision to choose the successor to the monarch/president belongs to a narrow circle of the ruling family. As a result of the analysis of the formal aspects of the succession process, the authors have positively verified the hypothesis. This is evidenced by: the limited role of the organs and institutions of the state in the succession process, very general formal requirements placed on candidates for the position of crown prince, and the inclusive nature of the selectorate.

The final conclusions drawn from the above research correspond to the research questions posed in the paper. Firstly, the authors identified the dominant model of selection of candidates and leaders (Figure 1). The degree of inclusivity varies in different countries, but it can generally be attributed to two categories. In the first instance, the royal family or the ruler themselves make the decision (Figure 2).

Secondly, the authors emphasized that the formal requirements placed on candidates for the throne are similar and most often involve being a male descendant of the ruling dynasty/family. In all constitutions, there is also a provision requiring the crown prince to swear allegiance to the reigning ruler. Among the informal requirements, political experience of the candidate/crown prince in important state positions is often cited. The crown prince is most commonly appointed by the reigning ruler after consultations with the 'family' body or, as is the case in the UAE, the Federal Supreme Council. It does not have to be the eldest son, as was the case in Qatar or Saudi Arabia, but in Bahrain or Oman, the principle of primogeniture still applies. It is also worth mentioning the prevailing customs/traditions: for example, in the UAE, the president is the ruler of Abu Dhabi, and the prime minister is the ruler of Dubai, while in Kuwait, there was a tradition of alternating power between two branches of the dynasty: Al-Ahmed and Al-Salem, which, however, was bypassed in the recent succession order.

Thirdly, succession does not always follow established political traditions everywhere. This is especially true for Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. However, from a formal perspective, one can consider that the procedure itself was maintained – formal principles, albeit allowing for interpretation, were observed and implemented in accordance with the law.

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