

Sheikh Sabah al Ahmad al Jaber al Sabah -

the man who carved a space for Kuwait on the international stage

No one has done more to shape the image of Kuwait, and to carve a space for the country on the international stage, than Sheikh Sabah al Ahmad al Jaber al Sabah, the country's Emir who died today. He had been at the centre of the leadership of his country since its independence in 1962, starting as Minister of Information, but a few months later promoted to Foreign Minister, a position he held for forty years, before becoming prime minister, and then in January 2006, assuming the role of Emir.

In 1962 the British, who exercised a protectorate over the territories in the Gulf stretching from Oman to Kuwait, decided that not only Kuwait was ready for independence, but that granting it independence was the best way for them to retain a privileged position, especially in its economy. Oil had already made the territory rich, and the British were keen to insulate the ruling Al Sabah family from the pressures of Arab nationalism, felt here more than in other Gulf territories because of the large population of non-Kuwaiti Arabs who had moved there and kept the country, especially the oil economy running. Among them were many Palestinians displaced by the conflict in Palestine who the British felt were particularly prone to radicalisation.

The problem was that Kuwait from day one of its independence had its very existence challenged by an increasingly assertive Iraq. Rumbblings of an imminent Iraqi attack had the British rushing back with thousands of troops only days after they had left. It was a false alarm, but in 1991 something similar happened, although this time it was for real. Iraq occupied Kuwait and most Kuwaitis including the whole government and Royal family went into exile. It took a major international effort in the first Gulf War (1990-91) to return to the status quo ante. That effort we should not forget, saw unprecedented co-operation between the United States and Russia, and saw Syrian troops fighting on the same side as Americans and British.

In 1962, because of the precarious situation resulting from the Iraqi threat and the nationalist pressures, the British very strongly advised the al Sabah family that they should go out and make friends in the world. As Foreign Minister it was Sheikh Sabah who led this effort for forty years from 1963-2003, and after as prime minister and later Emir. As part of this policy Kuwait established early on an extensive network of embassies – not easy for a country with a small population and not much experience of diplomacy. It also established the Kuwait Fund to assist with humanitarian and development aid. The Fund was to become a model for others in other oil rich Gulf countries later on. Sheikh Sabah's own generosity and personal commitment to humanitarian assistance was recognised on many occasions by the United Nations and other governments and statesmen. Sheikh Sabah was also the architect of a policy to make Kuwait an honest broker and mediator in different international disputes, often through low-key initiatives.

After 2003 Sheikh Sabah had to focus more on domestic issues, first as prime minister, and then, somewhat unexpectedly as Emir following a problem with the succession after death of the 3rd Emir, Sheikh Jaber. The heir apparent Sheikh Saad was considered too ill, and after a tense few days

Sheikh Sabah was declared Emir to replace him. That short constitutional crisis also brought to the fore Kuwait unique political texture, where, unlike in some other Gulf states, the ruling family shares power with an elected parliament. Something similar was introduced after the 1962 independence, but it was after the 1991 restoration in the aftermath of the first Gulf war that it became much more accentuated. Having a dynamic, often adversarial political system running in parallel to a strong ruling family is neither easy nor simple. For others in the Gulf, the Kuwait model often looks like chaos. Parliament has often clashed with Ministers from the ruling al Sabah family, sometimes withholding their confirmation or forcing their resignation. Within parliament Islamists, nationalists and leftists often vie against each other. Whilst Sheikh Sabah himself has been by and large beyond reproach managing this tension between the ruling family and parliament was his most important task as Emir, and is likely to be the same to his successor too.

Because of this, or possibly even in spite of it, Kuwait's leadership is quite collegiate. Various branches of the Al Sabah family have to be accommodated when the national cake is being shared, and especially in the distribution of key positions in the government and the armed forces. But the ruling family has also learnt how to build alliances with political, religious and social forces. That sometimes makes decision-making cumbersome but it enforces the continuity of the system. The new Emir, 83 year old Nawaf al Ahmed al Sabah is half-brother of Sheikh Sabah and has been Crown Prince since 2006, when as a result of an Emiri decree he was appointed to the post against the tradition of the Al-Sabah family, according to which the offices of Emir and Crown Prince alternate between the Al-Jaber and Al-Salem branches. The new Emir is unlikely to make major policy changes in the short term, but like the other Gulf ruling families, the al Sabah face many challenges from within and from without, and questions arise as to when Kuwait will make the sort of generational change in the ruling family as we have seen in some other Gulf states. The appointment of the next Crown Prince will therefore define the new ruler as much as anything else.

For the moment the priority for the new Emir will be internal consolidation, including in the face of economic stress as the price of oil collapses and the world tries to come to grips with the Coronavirus pandemic and its consequences.

Externally the immediate challenge to the new Emir is relations with other GCC states. Kuwait has under Sheikh Sabah tried to distance itself from the dispute between Qatar and other Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and UAE. Instead it has tried to play the role of mediator, though not with much success. The Kuwaitis have generally tried to carve their own niche within the complex politics of Arab Gulf ruling families. Sheikh Nawaf does not have a background in diplomacy as Sheikh Sabah had – his experience was more in the Ministry of Interior and the National Guard. This is not necessarily a handicap in Gulf politics. We have yet to see if the new Emir of Kuwait will have the energy and the political will to invest in healing the rifts in the region and contribute to the process of regional co-operation.

Dr Dennis Sammut is a historian who has researched the end of the British period in the Gulf, and who writes regularly on contemporary European Security issues and Gulf affairs. He is the Director of LINKS Europe based in The Hague.