SUDDEN SUCCESSION

Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East

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The King is Dead! Does It Matter?

Succession in the Middle East, though much discussed among Middle East analysts and pundits, is often raised outside any broader context, either historical or theoretical. The usual approach is to spread out a few scenarios—three is always a popular number—and then prioritize them according to intuition. And truth be told, there is no proven method of prediction better than the best guess.

But there is a more profound question than who might succeed a departed leader and how: does his untimely demise matter?

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The general question of whether leaders matter is a large one, and an old one. One might be excused for thinking that the answer is obvious, given that so much time and energy are invested getting into the heads of leaders. Intelligence agencies compile biographical profiles, even psychological ones, in the certainty that leaders matter a great deal. But there is a school that isn't persuaded, and that holds that leaders cannot divert the broad stream of history, or are themselves pushed to the fore by that stream.

This debate feeds a whole gray genre known as alternative history. What if Lincoln had presided over Reconstruction? What if that bomb had killed Hitler in Munich in 1939? What if the bullets had missed JFK? Just how crucial was the leader to the events that followed his departure or near miss? Whoever begins to try to answer these questions exposes his or her core assumptions fairly quickly.

So, to anticipate my own core assumptions, consider two contrasting cases: Egypt's President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and Saudi Arabia's King Salman. If either disappeared tomorrow, there would be a succession issue, perhaps even a crisis. But the potential *effects* would be different. One of these men is a vital sixty-four-year-old general in the middle of his project, the other an eighty-three-year-old monarch who has already suffered a stroke and has mild dementia. Just stating the comparison that way suggests that if Sisi goes, his departure is likely to be more consequential than the departure of Salman. Once one goes beyond the nuts and bolts of succession, and asks what would be the *effect*, many variables come into play. I propose to make the case for one of them as being the most fundamental: the life arc or trajectory of the subject.

The test of this assumption can't be in future speculation, so let me now offer a comparison of historical cases where the sudden departure of leaders meant much or meant little, with life's arc as the variable.

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Let me begin with two paradigmatic examples from modern Arab history. The two most consequential Arab leaders in each half of the twentieth century died in office, died young, died of illness, and died unexpectedly. They were King Faisal I of Iraq, who died in 1933 at the age of fifty, and President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt, who died in 1970 at the age of fifty-two. There are similarities in these two instances, but also some very striking differences.

King Faisal I, formerly the Emir Faisal, was the first independent Arab head of state. He led the Arab Revolt in partnership with Britain during the First World War, and became Britain's Arab in the era of British dominance. He briefly established an abortive Arab kingdom in Syria in 1920; when France threw him out, the British installed him as king of Iraq in 1921. Iraq became an independent state under his stewardship in 1932.

Faisal's aim was to forge Iraq—its Arabs and Kurds, its Sunnis and Shia—into a nation. By 1932, he still had plenty to do. As he wrote in a famous memo that year: "An Iraqi people does not yet exist; what we have is throngs of human beings lacking any national consciousness or sense of unity, immersed in religious superstition and traditions, receptive to evil, inclined toward anarchy and always prepared to rise up against any government whatsoever."[1]

The chain-smoking Faisal went to Switzerland in 1933 for convalescence. He was exhausted and felt unwell, but no one thought he was at death's door. At his luxury hotel in Bern, he received Arab exiles from around the Middle East and North Africa. And he plied the social circuit, particularly the horse races. But on retiring one evening, he felt heart palpitations. His Swiss "celebrity" doctor gave him some sort of injection, but a short time later, he suffered a heart attack. An autopsy determined that he died from a ruptured artery caused by advanced arteriosclerosis. Crowds greeted his coffin on its long passage from Switzerland to Iraq, where he had a huge funeral. He was succeeded by his twenty-one-year-old son Ghazi.

Did Faisal's premature demise change the course of history? Some might say not. After all, the Iraqi monarchy survived for another twenty-five years, until the 1958 revolution. Ghazi lacked his father's moderation, but he died in a car crash in 1939. The next in line was a child, so Iraq was then ruled by a regent, in partnership with Faisal's own faithful lieutenants.

And Britain continued to prop up the Iraqi monarchy. Britain even invaded Iraq to save it in 1941, after pro-Axis officers pulled a coup.

But others have argued that Faisal's death was an unmitigated tragedy, the main factor that set Iraq on a course toward instability and violence, infecting the rest of the Arab world. After independence, the Iraqi army became a dominant player in politics. Here is Muhammad Tarbush, historian of Iraqi politics: "Had Faisal lived longer he might have been able to restrain the growth of the army's power." Instead, "the army's prestige and confidence increased," and within a few years, "it was the army officers and not politicians who were effectively in charge."[2]

So Faisal would have stood up to the army. Or perhaps his death tragically reopened the door to the British. Here is another Iraqi, Edmund Ghareeb: "If Faisal had lived ten more years, the history of Iraq would have been very different. After his death, the British were able to undermine the government and the monarchy by constantly putting pressure on them to serve Britain's interests."[3]

Faisal's admiring biographer, Ali Allawi, was asked recently what would have happened had Faisal lived to age seventy, that is, to 1953 instead of 1933. His answer: Faisal would have succeeded in creating what Iraq and the whole region lacked: "a sense of nationhood for disparate groups and communities." Moreover,

> the institutions of the modern Iraqi state would not have been degraded the way they were in various coups d'état after he died. I don't think we'd have had the kind of confrontation with Britain in 1941 that led to another invasion and all the subsequent traumas that came from that. I don't want to go into counter-factual history, but I think it would have been a different outcome.[4]

One might dispute this. Perhaps the very problems Faisal himself identified would have defeated him, regardless of how long he had lived. Perhaps the military, the British, and the obstreperous Iraqis would have broken him; his physical constitution wasn't strong. But one thing is certain: Faisal departed the scene in the middle of his own arc. He had done much, but more remained to be done, and he was still in a position to do it.

This is the crucial question that must be posed. If a leader were to disappear, where would he be in the arc of his life, his career, his vocation? If he is a leader, presumably he has a record of achievement. Is he in the middle of his life's work, still attending to it? Is he bringing it to a conclusion? Or is it behind him? (As we shall see, this doesn't directly correlate with age. Sometimes leaders launch early; others do so late.)

Let me now give a contrary example, of an unexpected death that came too late to have a huge effect. Gamal Abdul Nasser and his Free Officers overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in 1952. He soon emerged as the first among equals, then as the unquestioned ruler of Egypt. His biography became identical to Egypt's history: the Soviet alliance, the Suez war, the Nasserist wave of 1958, the makeup and breakup of union with Syria, the stumble of the Yemen war, and the disaster of the 1967 war with Israel.

Nasser became diabetic, according to his wife, in 1958. He smoked a hundred cigarettes each eighteen-hour workday, had arteriosclerosis, and suffered acute pain in his legs, so that he relied heavily on painkillers. In 1969, he had a heart attack and spent six weeks in bed. According to his Egyptian physician, this destroyed 40 percent of his cardiac function. A few months later, Nasser appointed Anwar Sadat as vice president. In the summer of 1970, Nasser went on a three-week visit for treatment in Moscow.

All the while, the Egyptian public was kept completely in the dark; they were told he had influenza. His Soviet doctors urged him to avoid stress, but he ignored them. In 1970, at the close of an Arab summit in Cairo, in the midst of the Black September crisis in Jordan, he suffered another heart attack and died. Sadat later related that he and Nasser had joked about the "poor fellow" who would succeed the president. "It certainly never crossed our minds," Sadat wrote, "that Nasser would die in the very same month."

Because of the illusion of immortality Nasser created, his followers, like Mohamed Heikal, could claim that he was about to write another great chapter when his life was cut short. And because of that, many old Nasserists believed Nasser couldn't possibly have

died of natural causes. Heikal would later go on to insinuate that Sadat poisoned him.

But did Nasser's death, at age fifty-two, really change the course of events? It is interesting to read a Central Intelligence Agency analysis of this, written early in 1971, a few months after Nasser died. It reviewed all the history-making events of Nasser's tenure, at home and in the region. Then it added this:

> On the face of it, the demise of so powerful and charismatic a leader would appear to mean widespread and fundamental change in the Arab world. And the months since Nasser's death have indeed seen changes in inter-Arab relations. But these differences have been subtle...This is so because Nasser's ability to influence events in the Arab world had declined substantially in recent years as a result of the humiliating Egyptian defeat at the hands of Israel in 1967. The other Arab leaders...all felt free to refuse to follow Nasser's policy direction. In a sense, then, the biggest "post-Nasser" changes had taken place prior to his death.[5]

In other words, he was finished before he was dead; he was already at the end of his arc.

The late Middle East scholar Fouad Ajami once speculated on what would have happened if Nasser had lived some more years. Just as Sadat did, Nasser probably would have gone to war with Israel to break the post-1967 deadlock. It is an argument Sadat himself made in 1974, when he announced that "if Nasser had lived to this day he would be doing what I am doing." But Ajami went on to add that had Nasser lived, "his charisma would have continued to fade and weaken, and his supporters would have grown increasingly lukewarm and indifferent to him. His premature and sudden death at 52 probably preserved his legacy and added to its potency."[6]

Now, there is a debate over the extent of continuity and change between Nasser and Sadat. But we can agree that Nasser's death in 1970 was less consequential than, say, his death would have been in 1954. This date has not been selected at random. In October 1954, Nasser gave a speech in the central square of Alexandria. In the middle of the speech, a would-be assassin, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, fired eight shots at Nasser. All of them missed, Nasser didn't flinch, and then he began to roll up the Muslim Brotherhood. Leaving aside the conspiracy theories (most notably, that Nasser himself engineered the whole thing), the point is this: had Nasser been killed in 1954—before Suez, before the United Arab Republic, before 1967—the effect on Egypt and the region would have been far more profound than the effect of his actual death in 1970.

Again, in making assessments, one has to ask where the leader stands in the arc of his life. In the middle, toward the end, or is all behind him? In 1954, Nasser was positioned somewhere in the middle—after the revolution, full of ambition, but with little to show for it yet. His death by bullet would have had incalculable effects. By 1970, his great achievements and errors were already in the past, his death by heart attack had fewer effects, and these were moderated by his chosen successor.

It isn't that such departures have no consequences. Specialists can always compose a long list of them. But the list shrinks when a leader is simply putting touches on his largely completed project. Of course, it can always be argued that a departed leader had one more move to make, one more trick up his sleeve. But no one has unlimited moves or tricks, the possibilities recede over time, and leaders late in life are sometimes averse to bold initiatives, especially if they have moved to planning for succession.

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That was arguably the case in three of the most famous Arab departures. Each one was certainly dramatic and even traumatic for people close to the leader or allied to him. But in retrospect, these departures weren't turning points, but landmarks on a continuing trajectory.

First, King Abdullah of Jordan, founder of the kingdom, which he carved out of nothing with the backing of Britain. He was felled by the bullets of Palestinian assassins during a visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque in 1951: the same al-Aqsa Mosque, in Jerusalem, in the West Bank, that he had annexed to Transjordan in the aftermath of the 1948 war with Israel. Abdullah had been the dominant figure in the

country for thirty years. On his death, he was sixty-nine years old.

What was the effect? Robert Satloff wrote a book set at this moment in the history of Jordan, called *From Abdullah to Hussein*. Yes, there was uncertainty, especially about the royal succession. It hadn't been sorted out; Abdullah's immediate successor, Talal, was mentally ill. But by this time, Abdullah wasn't the only person holding Jordan together. Aside from the British, there were people whom Satloff called "royalists" or "the king's men" who ran the country in the absence of a competent king.[7] They steered Jordan successfully through the challenges of the 1950s, unlike their blood relations in Iraq, who wound up being butchered and dragged through the streets.

This wasn't clear at the time, and many contemporary observers feared that the assassination would open up the floodgates. "The Islamic world has been in a jittery state," wrote the lead foreign affairs correspondent in the *New York Times*, "and the assassination of King Abdullah of Jordan will certainly make things a great deal worse."[8] In this view, the king was all that stood between the region and turmoil. A British newsreel declared: "A young fanatic killed the one man who might have brought peace to the Middle East." In this view, the assassination cut short the one chance for lasting peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

But the assassination didn't "make things a great deal worse," even in Jordan. As for peace with Israel, the evidence for such a claim is equivocal; up to that point, negotiations with Israel, such as they were, had gone nowhere. So it is a stretch to see Abdullah's departure as a turning point. Mary Wilson, an Abdullah biographer, wrote of his assassination that it "signified retribution for events that were already history, not the beginning of a new order. It was thus an act that was an end, rather than a beginning...Abdullah's assassination did not mark the failure of his life's work. On the contrary, the lack of repercussions afterwards measured the extent of his success."[9] At sixty-nine, Abdullah was close to the end of his arc. Over thirty years, he had built a kingdom, expanded it, and stabilized it. He was a hugely consequential figure in history; but his assassination wasn't nearly as consequential.

Likewise, consider the assassination of Saudi Arabia's King Faisal in 1975 by a disgruntled nephew. He was the third Saudi monarch, a daring reformer who had opened the kingdom to the world, much as his father, King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, had done. Most of this unfolded in the 1960s, when Faisal accelerated the modernization of the kingdom, while putting up a successful resistance to a wave of Nasserist subversion that threatened monarchies across the region. It was also Faisal who guided Saudi policy through the oil embargo of 1973. In 1974, *Time* magazine named him "Man of the Year." "Throughout 1974," *Time* determined, "Faisal's actions about oil prices and related matters touched in various degrees the lives and pocketbooks of virtually every human being on earth."

But from the inside, it looked rather different. As a U.S. diplomat, Jim Larocco, later recalled, "Faisal spent his last years picking lint off his *thobe*."[10] Years earlier, he had successfully established a line of lateral succession for the subsequent two kings (Khalid and Fahd), and the transition upon his demise proceeded without a glitch. Faisal's departure in 1975 was a wash, not an inflection point in Saudi history.

Then there was Anwar Sadat: an original Free Officer, Nasser's chosen successor, hero of the 1973 war and the Camp David peace. Sadat was assassinated by his own soldiery at a military parade in 1981; he was sixty-two. His death stunned the world: he had been feted from Washington to Jerusalem, and became perhaps the most popular Arab in the West in history. With his death, there emerged a whole series of "if Sadat had lived" tropes.

Menachem Begin, the Israeli prime minister who negotiated a peace treaty with Sadat, said that there would have been more progress toward Palestinian autonomy had Sadat lived, leading to warmer peace. Sadat's widow, Jehan, said her husband would have liberalized the country's politics. The journalist David Ottaway went further: "Sadat had even begun some pioneering reforms—allowing opposition political parties, implementing market-oriented economic changes—that might have rippled through the Arab world had he lived."[11] In this view, a longer-lived Sadat would have transformed not only Egypt but the whole Arab world.

The idea that Sadat had a third surprise under his belt, that if he had had more time he would have turned Egypt into a kind of Middle East Mexico, is intriguing. But the evidence from Sadat's last couple of years doesn't show much initiative. Rather, he was struggling to contain a growing domestic discontent that threatened his rule. That same David Ottaway, only nine days before Sadat's assassination, reported from Cairo that "whether he likes to admit it or not… Sadat is living in the shadow of the [deposed] shah" of Iran.[12]

When Sadat died, his chosen successor, Hosni Mubarak, didn't part from any of his predecessor's policies—so much so that it's hard to see a line between Sadat and post-Sadat. Mubarak lacked Sadat's flamboyance, but the ruling party continued to rule, the military continued to pull the strings, the leadership continued to batter the Islamists, and so on. As the writer Yusuf Idris put it, "Sadat dead is in some ways stronger than Sadat alive. His men are still in every corner of Egypt, whether as thieves or as policemen."[13] Sadat lived such a consequential life that his own death proved to be inconsequential.

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Then there are the cases where sudden death is highly consequential. If a leader is in the midst of a transformative project, his or her sudden departure can constitute a rupture that no one else can repair.

The foremost example is the 1995 assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin at the time was already seventy-three, an age by which many leaders have already completed their life's major project. But for various reasons, Rabin had started late. He had been prime minister in his fifties, but he had put in an uneven performance, and his party was punished for it at the ballot box. By the time he returned to the premiership, it was late in the day, and this imparted a sense of urgency, if not haste, to his administration. At Rabin's death, he had shaken Arafat's hand on the White House lawn, but the promised peace deal was far from completed or consolidated. The bullets found him in the very midst of his signature project.

So did his assassin, Yigal Amir, change history? In killing Rabin, had he killed a future peace? Or had Rabin seen the folly of it all, and was he about to step back? Here is Bill Clinton: "I remain convinced that had Rabin lived we would have achieved a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians by 1998 and we'd be living in a different world today... It would have been hard, but it would have been done."[14] This is also the view of the Israeli center-left, for whom Rabin's assassination—as described by his biographer, Itamar Rabinovich—constitutes a "turning point in Israel's history.[15] Or is the view of former chief-of-staff Moshe Yaalon more accurate? "Until this day, I am convinced that had Rabin not been assassinated, Israel would have done things differently....My understanding was that had Rabin lived, he would have reached a confrontation with Arafat in early 1996."[16] This is the view of the center-right: that Rabin died not before he could forge ahead, but before he could make a U-turn.

It really doesn't matter which view one prefers to conclude that the effects of the assassination were profound. One way or another, Rabin was in midair, in midcourse, and at a decision point.

The effect of Rabin's assassination was compounded by the conduct of his successor, Shimon Peres. Peres was urged by many of those involved in Oslo to push forward to a final agreement with the Palestinians, building on the momentum created by the assassination itself. But Peres balked, perhaps because he refused to see himself merely as Rabin's successor and instead wanted to build the next step on his own authority. He opted to go for elections first, which he lost, turning Binyamin Netanyahu effectively into Rabin's successor. The Rabin assassination became a case of slow-motion regime change, after which the dead man's successor worked to dismantle his project.

To match the Rabin case, I would add the assassination of Lebanon's Rafiq Hariri. Hariri, the Sunni son of a greengrocer become tycoon, a self-made and Saudi-made man, had built a business empire, and then as prime minister orchestrated the postwar reconstruction of Lebanon during most of the period between 1992 and 2004. The critics of Hariri's recon-

struction drive were many, but they weren't bloody-minded about it, and whatever the shortcomings of Hariri's grand plan, it restored a semblance of dynamism to Lebanon's economy. When he left the premiership in 2004, at the age of sixty, he had begun another project: restoring a measure of political independence to Lebanon, which meant friction with Syria and its client Hezbollah. For this, he was punished with assassination by a huge car bomb in 2005.

Had he lived, Hariri's next move was designed to tap into a genuine base of support, as evidenced by the fact that his very assassination galvanized the movement he had hoped to lead, and which in turn compelled Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon. But as with Rabin, so with Hariri, there was no one to translate the passions released by his death into a durable program to implement his vision. And as with Rabin, so with Hariri, within six months of his death, the champions of his legacy were in disarray.

In Lebanon, where assassination is common, the prospect of political murder is simply the given constraint on all leaders. Hariri was acutely aware of this, and lived his life in a virtual fortress. But until his death, he had demonstrated almost a unique agility in escaping the gravitational forces, sectarian and others, that pull Lebanon's leaders down. In any event, he was certainly in midair and mid-movement when he was struck down, and Lebanon was at a crucial inflection point, in a situation of exceptional fluidity. Hariri's assassins, like Rabin's, weren't out for vengeance; they wanted to change the future. No doubt, they felt themselves vindicated.

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This essay ventures an alternative view on succession. In the end, some sort of succession is inevitable. An adage says that cemeteries are full of indispensable people, and in some formal sense, everyone is replaceable. There will always be a president of Egypt or a king of Saudi Arabia, as long as there is an Egyptian republic or a Saudi kingdom. So it is important to know the rules of succession, the various competitors, and the possible scenarios.

But in parallel, it is essential to estimate what potential future has been lost upon the departure of a leader. It may be substantial, it may be minimal. Much of this can be known only in hindsight, but a useful first approach is to ask where, in the arc of life, that life has been cut short.

And the paradoxical rule of thumb is this: the more successful the leader has been in realizing his project, the less consequential his exit, no matter how sudden or unexpected. In a way, this is counterintuitive. When a great leader dies, hasn't history been robbed of his next act, or his last act? No: the greatest leaders, and the luckiest ones, who've worked fast and evaded the bullet and the pathogen, have finished the last act. Very little is left on the agenda, and the less latitude there is for a successor to change the set course. They have made history.

Notes

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16. Author's translation from the Hebrew in Moshe Yaalon, *Derekh Arukah Ketsarah* [A long short road] (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, Sifre Hemed, 2008), 82.

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