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Navigating Change: A Closer Look at Kuwait's New Leadership and Policy Priorities

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Introduction

Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah [became](#) Kuwait's new ruler following a smooth succession after the death of his half-brother Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah on December 16, 2023. Just three years ago, he was declared the Crown Prince and became the country's de facto ruler in 2021 after Sheikh Nawaf [handed](#) over most of his duties to him. It is worth analyzing the background and the vision of Kuwait's new ruler as well as what his leadership would mean for the country and its international relations.

Sheikh Meshal has a long career in Kuwait's [security and intelligence apparatus](#) unlike his predecessors. He is a veteran intelligence and security czar. His professional history and strategic security vision significantly shape his perspectives on domestic and foreign policies. Over the course of his career, Mishal has served primarily in defense and security roles, including the development of the intelligence and security service of the country into the Kuwait State Security service, and later served as the deputy chief of the Kuwaiti National Guard.

Sheikh Mishal was one of Kuwait's principal decision-makers since the elevation of his older half-brother, Sheikh Sabah, in 2006. His influence particularly [grew after](#) Sheikh Sabah's health started to decline. However, he became the day-to-day ruler for much of the reign by his predecessor, Sheikh Nawaf. With decades of experience working alongside previous rulers, Sheikh Meshal is no stranger to the challenges that lie ahead.

In his inaugural speech upon taking the oath as the country's new emir, Sheikh Meshal [delivered](#) a robust address, rebuking the parliament and cabinet for harming national interests. He also [pledged](#) to temporarily halt promotions and new appointments, and objected to pardons granted by his predecessor. He [noted](#) in his speech that while he had disagreed with some of the previous emir's decisions, he had abided by them out of loyalty. Known for his resolute and determined nature stemming from his security background, Sheikh Meshal's unprecedented speech hinted that a probable overhaul of the administration initiated by the late emir would be prioritized high on the agenda. The firm tone of his speech resonated

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well in the face of numerous challenges confronting the country. With several tasks that lie ahead, significant changes in domestic politics are expected.

Tasks that Lie Ahead: New Crown Prince, New Government

Beyond the smooth transition of power to Sheikh Meshal, all eyes are now on the designation of the next heir. Sheikh Meshal's first major task as emir is to select a crown prince, a decision of great importance. Amid speculation over whether he will usher in a long-awaited generational shift already completed across the Gulf states, he has up to a year to designate a successor, adhering to Kuwait's constitutional process that also include the National Assembly (Parliament)'s approval on the nominated successor. However, Kuwait [lacks](#) a specific succession model, relying on the selection of the most suitable candidate among Mubarak's descendants. How Sheikh Meshal would make his decision, and whether he would opt to hand the baton to a younger Al-Sabah — more capable of a longer reign— may be the most consequential decision for Kuwait that he will make over the course of his tenure. Currently, no names of potential candidates have been publicly disclosed. However, opting for a younger figure would significantly impact Kuwait's future trajectory and stability.

The second task is to name the new prime minister and cabinet. Shortly after the speech, the government [submitted](#) its resignation in a procedural measure. Sheikh Meshal has to select a prime minister to assemble a new cabinet in a move that will set the tone for relations with the opposition-led parliament, hailed as the most active in the Gulf region. The cabinet [will continue](#) as a caretaker government until a new one is formed. One of the first tasks is to keep things on track at home to ensure stability and block any attempt to wreak havoc on Kuwait.

Domestic Politics: Old Problems, New Solutions?

In his speech, Sheikh Meshal underscored an intensified commitment to strengthening governance and enhancing accountability, signaling a profound dedication to combating corruption in the pursuit of effective governance. Sheikh Meshal faces the task of pulling the country out of long-standing political paralysis and reforming a bloated public sector that have turned Kuwait into one of the Gulf's most laggard states. Kuwait suffers from constant disputes between elected lawmakers and cabinets, which maintains a strong grip over political life, despite a relatively robust parliamentary system in place since 1962. The deadlocks have prevented the country from diversifying its economy, while

repeated budget deficits and low foreign investment have added to the crises. As Ghanim AlNajjar [notes](#), “Although Kuwaiti democracy is imperfect in many ways, it is also the only long-standing parliamentary process in the Gulf region.” Sheikh Meshal's rebuke of the legislative and executive branches can be interpreted as a call for urgent and effective cooperation between Kuwait's Parliament and Cabinet to ensure domestic stability and navigate regional political volatility successfully.

As the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are going through historic transformations at domestic levels towards diversifying their economies away from oil, Kuwait still lags far behind. Despite abundant oil wealth, Kuwaitis have expressed dissatisfaction with their country's apparent stagnation in both economic and cultural realms. Many [Kuwaitis hold hope](#) that Sheikh Meshal's era will signify a period of reform and accomplishment across various administrative and political spheres. Consequently, the primary focus should be on managing the country's transition to a post-oil era. The new leadership appears to be aligning with regional trends, with analysts suggesting that Sheikh Meshal is likely to adopt a ["reformist"](#) approach, prioritizing impartial decision-making and rejecting nepotism or favoritism. Domestic matters are anticipated to take precedence over foreign policy matters.

Foreign Policy: Continuity amid Challenges

Situated amidst larger and assertive neighbors, and characterized by a delicate societal balance, Kuwait diverges from certain aspects of the GCC in its foreign policy approach. Traditionally, Kuwait adopts a pragmatic, neutral, and inclusive stance towards regional actors and crises. It has historically [played](#) a significant role in regional diplomacy, mediating conflicts such as the major rift between Saudi Arabia and its allies on one side and Qatar on the other. Kuwait's foreign policy strategy, rooted in soft power tools like diplomacy, mediation, and foreign aid, has been consistent for decades, dating back to Sheikh Sabah's era, and is likely to be continued under the new emir. This approach serves as Kuwait's means of ensuring stability and survival in a politically fragile region.

Kuwait has been relieved since the [Al-Ula declaration](#) that ended the Gulf dispute (2017-2021). Sheikh Meshal's leadership is likely to be seen as continuity in foreign policy, under the doctrine of “zero enemies and a lot of friends – regionally and internationally.” The ability to speak with everyone makes Kuwait a key regional player, which is a source of national pride as well. While foreign policy directions in neighbouring states have changed rapidly, particularly as new generations have come into power, foreign policy direction would not see a major change

including the same themes. The foreign policy outlook seems to include an emphasis on preserving Gulf unity, especially relations with Saudi Arabia, promoting a reduction in regional tension, engaging Iran diplomatically, maintaining a robust alliance with the US, giving steadfast support to the Palestinian cause, and staunchly opposing the [Abraham Accords](#) of 2020. However, challenges include navigating geopolitical complexities in the volatile region, including the Israel-Hamas conflict.

Conclusion

Meeting people's growing needs while charting a secure path for a small country surrounded by large states in a tough neighborhood has never been easy. It requires a unity of purpose and unleashing a stalled, multifaceted development sorely needed for Kuwait to remain relevant and thrive in an ever-changing region. Given his age, Sheikh Meshal is poised to be a transitional figure of significant importance. Every decision he makes will profoundly influence the country's future trajectories, both domestically and internationally.

Once the crown prince is designated and the new cabinet is formed, the focus of Kuwaiti leadership will shift towards crucial domestic issues. The robustness of Kuwait's foreign policy stance is contingent upon its resilience and consistency on the

home front. In the [words](#) of a prominent Kuwaiti scholar Bader Saif: "His (Sheikh Nawaf) was a transitional era, one marked by an uneasy coexistence and battling of the old and new. The birth pangs of a new Kuwait (under sheikh Meshal) are yet to be seen."

About the author

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The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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