

In Oman, Sultan Qaboos Leaves a Legacy of Nonalignment. Can His Successor Keep It?

Frida Ghitis | Thursday, Jan. 16, 2020



Oman's new sultan, Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, at the Royal Family Council in Muscat, Oman, Jan. 11, 2020 (Oman News Agency photo via AP Images).

For years, a cloud hung over a corner of the Middle East, containing fears of yet another conflict suddenly erupting. They centered on what would happen after the death of the longest reigning monarch in the Gulf, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who ruled over the Sultanate of Oman for half a century without leaving behind an heir apparent. Qaboos had been ill for years, and yet, if you tried to gently broach the subject of his successor with Omani citizens, they would recoil. The sultan had set up a system for succession (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/22969/oman-s-looming-succession-crisis-is-a-warning-sign-in-an-already-fractured-gulf>) and everyone knew it. But no one knew if it would work.

After Qaboos died last Friday, it didn't take long to find out. By Saturday, his successor—his cousin, Haitham bin Tariq al-Said—had been named to the throne, vowing to continue the policies that turned tiny Oman into a key player in a region of much larger, wealthier and aggressive nations unafraid to pummel, pressure and dominate their neighbors.

It was one final success for Qaboos, a posthumous victory for a soft-spoken man who achieved remarkable feats. The plan was that the royal family would come together after his death and decide on a successor. If after a few days no consensus emerged, they would open a letter in which Qaboos named his choice. But according to Omani media reports, the royal family went straight for the letter (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/oman-named-sultan-qaboos-cousin-as-its-new-ruler-11578756397>), ensuring there was almost no gap between rulers—and no time for unrest and intrigue.

By refusing to announce his heir, Qaboos perhaps sought to prevent an anointed successor from coming to power the way he did, back in 1970, when Oman was ruled by his reclusive, backward-looking father. The sultanate had found oil the previous decade, but it remained grindingly poor, stuck in the past and beset by civil war, with a separatist movement in its south along the border with Yemen. There was almost no electricity and few paved roads; slavery was still legal.

The young Qaboos had been summoned back to Oman and confined to unofficial palace arrest after his education at Britain's prestigious Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. In a bold move, with backing from Britain, he overthrew his father and became absolute ruler.

What followed was a dizzying pace of modernization. Qaboos quickly resolved the conflict with rebels in southern Oman and launched a program of development, building roads, schools, hospitals, ports and other infrastructure. Living standards soared, and Qaboos, by all evidence, became wildly popular.

He remained absolute ruler with overwhelming authority, but he displayed remarkably progressive views in some areas. In 1996, Oman enacted a Basic Law, akin to a constitution, that was strikingly liberal by regional standards. It declared Islam the state religion, but banned discrimination on the basis of creed, sect, gender or social status, expressly guaranteeing the right to practice other religions.

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For outsiders, one of the most notable aspects of Qaboos' rule was his foreign policy. Oman occupies the southeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and peering out over the Strait of Hormuz and beyond it, Iran. Caught between the perennial Sunni and Shiite rivals on different sides of the Gulf, Oman—where most citizens follow Ibadi Islam—somehow managed to avoid being absorbed into either their conflicts or their spheres of influence. It was a feat that required incalculable skill. Qaboos turned Oman into a bridge, a mediator and a conciliatory force working for peace and stability in the region.

American audiences perhaps first heard about Oman's diplomatic clout when it was revealed that American and Iranian diplomats had been meeting for secret talks in the sultanate starting in 2013, hammering out what ultimately became the Iran nuclear deal (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-bilateral/u-s-iran-held-secret-talks-on-march-to-nuclear-deal-idUSBRE9AN0FB20131124>) negotiated under President Barack Obama and later rejected by President Donald Trump.

But Qaboos had already been promoting reconciliation for decades by then, across multiple conflicts. Oman was the rare Arab country that supported the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel and was one of only three Arab countries that didn't sever diplomatic ties with Egypt after its peace treaty was signed with Israel in 1979. As recently as 2018, Qaboos publicly welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/26905/netanyahu-s-visit-highlights-oman-s-mediating-role-in-a-troubled-region>) to Muscat. Most recently, Oman served as mediator in an effort to stop the war between Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis and Saudi-led forces. Oman also negotiated the release of three American hikers (<https://www.cnn.com/2011/09/21/world/meast/iran-hikers/index.html>) who were arrested by Iran in 2009 and charged with

spying. And, somehow, Oman resisted taking sides in the dispute that has cleaved the Gulf Cooperation Council (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28443/are-saudi-arabia-and-its-gulf-neighbors-close-to-ending-the-qatar-boycott>), as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have led an embargo of Qatar to coerce its government to align its foreign policy positions with theirs, especially on Iran.

Will Haitham have the skills to keep Oman along that razor-thin edge of nonalignment

(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/oman-names-culture-minister-as-successor-to-sultan-qaboos/2020/01/11/03fa2b80-3440-11ea-971b-43bec3ff9860_story.html)? It's impossible to know, but the new, 66-year-old ruler has vowed to "follow in the same path as the late sultan, and the principles that he asserted for the foreign policy of our country."

Haitham's challenges are daunting. In addition to dealing with the crushing pressures from Oman's powerful neighbors, he will have to confront the sultanate's own urgent problems. Although the royal family wants Oman's 4.6 million people to see him as the choice of the revered Qaboos, there was never any certainty that he would become ruler. The other leading candidates were Haitham's two brothers, Asad and Shihab. Some thought Asad, who has played a key foreign policy role as a deputy prime minister, had the inside track

(<https://www.wsj.com/articles/sultan-qaboos-modern-omans-founder-dies-11578706227>).

Like Qaboos, Haitham was educated in Britain. He studied at Oxford University and served in a number of important government jobs at home, most recently as culture minister. Earlier, Qaboos put him in charge of diversifying and revitalizing Oman's economy, which is in trouble. The oil that paid for the country's rapid modernization is running out and selling cheaply, so government revenues are in a steep decline. On the other side of the ledger, the government engaged in massive spending amid the Arab uprisings in 2011, to stave off popular unrest. Back then, Omani protesters did not target Qaboos, but they did come out in force to complain about the lack of jobs. Qaboos promised to fix that, creating more public sector jobs and raising wages, among other steps. Now Oman has a massive budget deficit (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/22349/in-an-era-of-low-oil-prices-oman-faces-a-post-2011-political-reckoning>), growing debt and almost no economic growth. Haitham will have to work overtime to diversify the economy and prevent living standards from declining.

Among his many challenges, there is one he will find almost impossible to overcome: the inevitable comparisons to his predecessor, who raised Omanis out of poverty and kept the country at peace despite being surrounded by bullies, belligerents and rebels.

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