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Oman: The End of the Qaboos Era

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Oman faces a test of stability following the passing of its leader of the past half century, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said. For years, the Sultanate's stability was ensured thanks to Qaboos's sober and carefully balanced policy, centering on equilibrium and mediation between hostile neighbors, while striving to maintain a neutral image. However, following his death, other elements, especially regional actors, may try to increase their involvement and influence in the sultanate, which possesses abundant natural resources and a strategic location. Oman's approach to Israel and the history of special relations between the states dating back to the 1970s are part of the Sultanate's foreign policy, which, based on considerations of survival, was exceptional in the regional arena. The Sultan's successor, Haitham bin Tariq al-Said, is expected to adhere to this policy and maintain close relations with Israel.

The reign of Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said was much longer than the reigns of other Arab rulers. He rose to the throne in 1970, after ousting his father from power with the help of a group of retired British army officers in a mission sanctioned by a mainstream group within the ruling Conservative Party in London.

At the time, the Soviet Union had gained a foothold in Yemen and helped establish the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. This entity promptly provided assistance to a "popular" uprising in the Dhofar region in south Oman. However, the British feared that the move would set off a domino effect, leading to Soviet control of the Arabian Peninsula, including the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important maritime crossing. In the 1960s, a group of British officers operated in Yemen with the help of Israel, which parachuted fourteen arms drops to royalist forces in the country, strengthening their hand in the battle against the republicans, who in turn were supported by an Egyptian expeditionary force (the Egyptian failure in Yemen dealt a harsh blow to the morale of the Egyptian army, which resonated in the Six Day War of 1967).

Qaboos held all the key portfolios of the Oman government, and hence the concern for the political stability of the sultanate. Moreover, many Omanis, most of whom were born after Qaboos came to power, identify the sultanate with him. The popularity he enjoyed throughout his reign was also thanks to his success in extracting the country from

international isolation and his modernization of what was a backward state. When Qaboos took power, Oman had only three schools and 10 kilometers of roads.

Unlike other Gulf monarchs, Qaboos had no offspring and no brothers. One of the reasons that Qaboos did not name his successor during his lifetime was likely related to disputes among his relatives over the issue of succession and due to his concerns that this could spark a political crisis. Following Qaboos's death, in accordance with the constitution he drafted, a pre-prepared letter was opened in which he named his 65-year-old cousin Haitham, the minister of culture and heritage, as his heir. Haitham seems to have popular support, although a political crisis is still possible, as conflicts may arise between the various branches of the family, or between the family and the military.

Apart from establishing his role, Haitham faces a number of other challenges, led by an ongoing economic crisis and the need to balance hostile neighbors.

Economic Crisis: With the exception of a number of localized violent incidents, Oman has managed to avoid regional upheavals and maintain its stability. However, the government, which generates around 80 percent of its revenues from oil, has had difficulty balancing the need for economic reforms with the need to provide requisite welfare services to its citizens in order to maintain the status quo; this difficulty has been compounded by low oil prices. During the years of his reign, Qaboos diverted Oman's oil revenues to extensive development projects, but Oman's oil and foreign currency reserves are relatively small compared to those of its Gulf neighbors. Therefore, alongside attracting investment and requesting additional aid from its wealthy neighbors, the sultanate began to privatize its electricity and oil sectors, including to investors from Malaysia and China. In February 2017 and again in January 2018, there were localized demonstrations in Oman calling for reforms, in particular economic reforms. Omanis are frustrated by the economic situation and strive to play a more significant role in the management of state affairs, but at the same time seek to avoid the bloodshed and chaos that have affected many countries in the region. Thus, they have refrained from blatantly challenging the government: among the demands made during the protests, calls to topple Qaboos were conspicuously absent. The government, in response to the demonstrations, has tightened its oversight of the population, especially on social networks.

Balance: To compensate for the sultanate's relative weakness, Sultan Qaboos implemented a singular foreign policy. To maintain an image of neutrality, for example, Oman did not join Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2015 in the war in Yemen, nor has it participated in their boycott of Qatar since 2017. Of the Gulf states, Oman has a unique sectarian composition in the region: most of its residents belong to a moderate Muslim sect – the Abadia – who are distinct from Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Perhaps because of

this, Oman is the only Arab state that did not see any of its population joining the Islamic State (ISIS). Moreover, Oman maintains close relations with Iran, with which it shares control of the Strait of Hormuz. Relations between the two countries have grown stronger since Hassan Rouhani was elected President of Iran (2013) and Oman has leveraged these ties vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which seeks to influence the sultanate to align with them. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi accused the sultanate, inter alia, of supporting Qatar and the Houthi insurgents. Oman, which has tense ties with the UAE, accused the latter of conducting espionage on its territory, and in April 2019, prosecuted five UAE nationals on such charges. Interestingly, Mohammed bin Zayed, the current heir and acting leader of the UAE, visited Oman in December 2019 while Sultan Qaboos was undergoing medical care in Belgium. Qaboos's close ties with Iran also contributed to the formulation of the nuclear agreement with Iran. Oman continues to assist in contacts between Iranian, Saudi, and American figures.

Oman and Israel

After Qaboos came to power, the British initiated ties between Israel and Oman, which at the time was dealing with an invasion from Yemen into the Dhofar region in the south of the sultanate. British and Iranian aid (during the Shah's rule, prior to the Islamic Revolution) was supplemented by Israeli military and political advice, as well as Israeli help in providing solutions to the water shortage in the sultanate.

After some twenty years of secret and sensitive relations between Oman and Israel, there was a positive shift in the ties between the two countries following the signing of the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan. That same year, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who wanted to infuse a regional dimension to the historic agreement, arrived in Muscat on a direct flight from Tel Aviv. News of the visit and the meeting between Rabin and Qaboos was published with the agreement of both parties. Oman was the first of the Gulf states to approve the establishment of an Israeli diplomatic mission. Following that, delegations were set up in other countries in the region, but the momentum slowed in the first and second decades of the 21st century, inter alia because of the political stalemate on the Israeli-Palestinian front. However, some of the Gulf states currently allow economic-trade collaborations with Israeli entities, as well as Israeli participation in international sporting events and in conventions taking place in their territory. Oman was a pioneer in this regard and was heavily involved in developments.

Oman also played a part in the Saudi peace plan. The initiative, promoted by Saudi Crown Prince and heir Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, laid out terms (via journalist Tom Friedman) for peace and normalization between the Arabs and Israel. The Saudis sent a message to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon via Oman together with a request that

Israel not reject the initiative outright. Prime Minister Sharon accepted the request and said only that he would not respond to media interviews.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu conducted an official visit to Muscat in 2018 and according to reports en route flew over Saudi airspace. The Palestinian question was raised during talks between Netanyahu and Sultan Qaboos, but the Omani host did not pressure Israel on the matter. Questioned by a Palestinian representative at an event following Netanyahu's visit, an Omani spokesman said that given that for seventy years the Palestinians had not been able to advance their claims against Israel, they would do well to seek new and different formulas that were in line the spirit of the time. In essence, the Palestinians were told to think of something else.

Haitham has some economic experience (he headed the Oman Vision 2040 committee) and also has a diplomatic past, having served as Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry. In addition, he enjoys considerable legitimacy as Qaboos's choice. However, he takes over the role of sultan after Qaboos created the state in his image for 50 years. Haitham was favored over his brother, Assad, who was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in 2017 and was regarded by many as Qaboos's successor. In his first speech as sultan, Haitham promised to continue on Qaboos's path, to develop the country, and to maintain the sultanate's unique foreign policy. "We will continue to assist in resolving disputes peacefully," he added. Haitham assumes his role at a time when tension between the United States and Iran runs high, and thus Omani mediation is more crucial than ever. Sultan Haitham is likely to follow his predecessor's path and continue, for example, to maintain close ties with Iran on the one hand and with Israel on the other. But first and foremost, he will have to establish his rule and deal with the economic and political challenges faced by the sultanate.