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Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies

# Qaboos's Oman and the New Sultan's Challenges

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**Al-Bayan Center Studies Series**

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“It is a pleasure for me to speak to you this evening through our Omani radio. Our intention is to make sure that you closely know the government's plans<sup>1</sup> and the steps it will take to achieve reassurance and progress for our people, prosperity, and security for our country. On this basis, you can trust that our conversation tonight will determine the direction of the future. We will have a similar conversation in the future...”.

With these words, the founder of modern Oman, the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, began his speech a month after he assumed power in the Sultanate in 1970. Sultan Qaboos bin Saeed passed away at the age of 80. He has the longest reign of rule among the Arab leaders, and the third in the world.

The Sultan started his career after he managed to control the Dhofar revolution, and worked to create the appropriate climate to end it “through a reform program for the country at all levels, showing people that the revolution is a legitimate right and the only way to express love to the country. He did not carry any hatred against the revolutionaries, and he expressed the importance of having the awareness to meet the challenges facing the country<sup>2</sup>.” He worked to confront the causes of the revolution, address them, rebuilds Dhofar, and take into account the legitimate demands of the people.

“The shift in the course of the Omani political process from exclusivity to the participation of the public and many sectors in the state was one of the most important achievements of Sultan Qaboos in Oman, which was considered one of the late countries in adopting the modern democratic method<sup>3</sup>.” Oman administration was affected by the Sultanate's foreign policy, as the owners of the behavioral school sees it. They say, “the foreign policy is only an extension of the internal policy. This means that the decision-maker level is less than the state level in general, and therefore the leader's personality is a key factor in external decision-making<sup>4</sup>.” Although the Sultanate had limited resources and returns,

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this prompted him to start implementing large projects to develop the country, focusing on political reform of the structure of the system and social reform. “The feature of realism was evident in the Sultan administration of the country<sup>5</sup>.”

Besides, the Sultan continued his local accomplishments in restoring the Omani role as an active regional player by ending his father’s separatist foreign policy through “official, neutral, and realistic positions to deal with the current changes in the region<sup>6</sup>.” This made the Sultanate’s foreign policy an example of meditation, balance, and moderation by abandoning extremist positions and supporting the stability of the region to ensure Omani interests by devoting more interest in foreign policy and implementing the Sultanate’s independent neutral policies.

At the beginning of his career, the Sultan sought to solve or settle the border problems between the Sultanate and neighboring countries to prevent using others from using these problems as a pressure card. Oman started to end its border disputes with “Saudi Arabia in May 1991, with Yemen in October 1992, with the United Arab Emirates in 1993, and with Iran in 1975<sup>7</sup>.” This was considered an important achievement to Sultan Qaboos in building a new foreign policy for the Sultanate through which he managed to keep Oman on a good relationship with the major powers through its commitment to international legitimacy, the basic principles of the international system, and the spread of peace efforts in the world.

### **The role of Sultan Qaboos and its reflection on state policy**

**First: Politically:** After assuming power, Sultan Qaboos sought to build an atmosphere of tolerance and moderation. He also draw the general framework of Omani policy at the internal and external levels by strengthening ties of friendship with the countries of the world without differentiating between one country and another, and creating a culture of positive and impartial political behavior. He worked to achieve justice and prosperity for his people by building the civil institutions that carry that responsibility, and he embodied that vision by saying, “Peace is a safe doctrine and a requirement we seek without negligence or excess<sup>8</sup>.”

The geographical location of Oman had an effect in achieving political stability, “and the historical experience, its practices, and orientations represented a frame

of reference for the Sultanate's strategies at different stages in the development of that stability<sup>9</sup>." Another clear impact on achieving political stability is the centralization of the political decision under the Sultan in terms of representation and implementation, "and the weak influence of political institutions such as the Consultative Council, the Shura Council, or other institutions on the political decision, as well as the absence of political parties in the Sultanate<sup>10</sup>." This means that the decision-making process and its implementation depend on the Sultan alone without consultation with others to take their opinion. This has helped the Sultan in moving more freely and support the political stability in the Sultanate on the internal and external levels.

The infographic is divided into two main sections. The top left section, in a grey-blue box, states "For 300 years, Al Busaidi Family has ruled Oman". The top right section, in a purple box, states "1970 Sultan Qaboos Started his Rule". Below these, a yellow box titled "8 positions held by the Sultan" lists the following roles, each with a small icon: Minister of Finance (red ribbon), Minister of Foreign Affairs (blue ribbon with star), Chairman of the Supreme Council for Planning (orange ribbon), The Head of the Central Bank (purple ribbon), Ruler of the Country (purple ribbon with star), Prime Minister (orange ribbon with star), Minister of Defense (blue ribbon with star), and The Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces (red ribbon with star). To the right of the list is a portrait of Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said wearing his traditional turban and robe.

**Source:** The return of Sultan Qaboos and the guarantees of transferring the government, Al-Jazeera Center for Studies, April 2015

**Second: Economically:** The Sultanate of Oman witnessed an economic development process in various stages due to security and political stability that started after 1970, as well as social harmony among members of the Omani people, which had a prominent impact on economic, political, social and cultural life. Moreover, it has had a direct impact on the life of the citizens whom their lives have changed from discontent, unemployment, and lack of income to economic well-being. The economic development has increased the per capita

income of the Omanis. The labor market has recovered in Sultanate. Investments expanded slowly with deliberate and successful steps in some economic aspects. “The goals of the Omani development strategy were based on providing a stable macroeconomic framework, developing human resources, and raising the standard of living for the Omani citizen while ensuring that all citizens benefit from the fruits of the development process<sup>11</sup>.” The plan focused on supporting the private sector, for the purpose of providing conditions to achieve economic .diversification in the Sultanate

The Sultanate of Oman has tried to diversify its national income by diversifying the sources of income and has started to support broad economic sectors for that. It has worked to support the transportation sector, tourism, agriculture, education, etc., and helped prepare laws related to taxes that have facilitated the process of attracting investments and businesses within the Sultanate. Oman was able to achieve that through low taxes and tax exemptions. “They do not impose income tax or consumption tax or value-added tax, and the rate of corporate taxes is 12%, and the tax burden constitutes 2.2% of gross domestic income<sup>12</sup>.” The income Oman got from Oil has raised the GDP of Oman and made it similar to the Gulf countries.

This economic development was accompanied by a number of strategies through which the Sultanate of Oman was able to increase the growth of its GDP. Despite some shortcomings that accompanied these strategies, the Sultanate was able to achieve a qualitative shift in all economic fields. It was able to install important pillars that formed the necessary foundations to start the launch of a new stage of economic development, “and there was growth in the country’s output in 1981. It was about (1.6) billion Omani riyals, and in 2011 the output at constant prices amounted to (22.7) billion Omani riyals<sup>13</sup>.” This growth of varying periods could not be achieved in the light of an unstable economic environment, which indicates that the dominant characteristic of the Omani economy is stability.

Non-oil activities have helped to support economic development in Oman even though the Sultanate is still an oil-dependent country. This indicates that the growth of non-oil activities such as agriculture, tourism, mining, transportation, and fisheries confirm that the development plans have succeeded in increasing revenues and spending them in a thoughtful and planned manner.

More importantly, the Sultanate “has many different investment fundamentals and opportunities, as it still contains many investment opportunities in all fields, and it also has a good international reputation for creditworthiness gained through policies to reduce the size of the public debt<sup>14</sup>.” This helped it to enhance confidence in its investment procedures.

### **Third: Societal Harmony**<sup>\*1</sup>

“The social structure is an important factor in influencing the policy of any country, negatively or positively, as homogeneity or incompatibility in the social structure of the population significantly affects the achievement of political and social stability. Therefore, it affects the quality of the foreign political movement, because societies that are torn ethnically cannot assemble the internal forces behind the external political state movement<sup>15</sup>.” The social renaissance brought about by the political system in the Sultanate was like the cornerstone of that march, and the human being is the focus of the development process led by the Omani leadership. Expressing it by saying: “The human being is the instrument of development, its maker, and aim. As long as that development in its various methods and means can provide a decent life for the individual and society, it is considered a successful development led by those in charge of it who is proud of its good results and positive effects<sup>16</sup>.” The Omani political system worked from this standpoint towards the social aspect whose results began to appear clearly in the Omani society, where the society was characterized by “stability, cohesion, social unity, fraternity, and love, and living in a state of peace and social security<sup>17</sup>.”

Perhaps what distinguishes the Sultanate of Oman historically from ethnic or tribal societal diversity, has greatly assisted in the success of its social renaissance, in which the Omani society has moved from a traditional social culture far from

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\*1. The total population of the Sultanate of Oman according to the census of citizens and residents for the year 2017 amounted to 4,634,375 million people, and 50% of the population lives in Muscat and the plain of Al Batinah. The majority of the population of the Sultanate of Oman are Muslims, and the Ibadi community constitutes three-quarters of the population in it. The rest are Sunnis with a Shiite minority that make up 5% of its population, but they come at the top of the economic pyramid. See Anwar Adel Muhammad, *Mediation Diplomacy - Omani Foreign Policy as a Model*, Journal of Strategic Research, No. 10, 2015. See also: The Omani National Center for Statistics and Information is available on the following link:

<https://www.ncsi.gov.om/Pages/NCSI.aspx>

modernity to a new social culture that derives its foundations from the historical and Islamic heritage of the Sultanate. The Sultan also worked to define the role of the political system that he led after coming to power through a culture that ensures the Sultanate's stability by caring for education. Also, the late Sultan focused on "developing awareness of individuals and providing them with the knowledge necessary to understand the general issues facing society, and introducing them to the rights, duties, power, factors, and governance systems that affect them to increase their information and their knowledge of what effective participation means and enhance their dialogue and acceptance of the other<sup>18</sup>."

After all the conditions that the Sultanate went through on the political, economic and social levels, it is possible to summarize a set of indicators that indicate the general stability in which the Sultan was able to be a major factor. They are<sup>19</sup>:

1. Power transmission (hereditary confined to the royal family).
2. The legitimacy of the political system (the legitimacy of the system comes through inheritance, an achievement on the ground, and popular consent).
3. The strength of the political system and its ability to protect society and the sovereignty of the state.
4. The limited change in positions of political leaders.
5. The absence of violence, civil wars, separatist movements, and rebellions.
6. National unity and the disappearance of sub-loyalties.
7. The success of the country's economic policies.
8. Low internal and external migration.

## The New Sultan's Challenges

During the Sultan Qaboos rule, the Sultanate of Oman played several roles on the external level. It has a role in the Arab-Iranian conflict in the region, the issues in Arabian Gulf and the Middle East. Oman also played a role in facing terrorism and other crises. However, the most prominent role was in the Iranian nuclear file. It had sponsored the negotiations between the US and Iran until the agreement was signed in 2015. This gave the Sultanate huge responsibility and status. Sultan Qaboos's successor is fully aware of these responsibilities placed on the Sultanate and its decision-makers.

On January 11, 2020, the new Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said ascended the throne as the new Sultan of Oman, succeeding the late Sultan Qaboos. He assured "he will continue the foreign policy based on peaceful coexistence and international cooperation and contribute to resolving differences and support the Arab Gulf cooperation. He stressed that Oman will maintain friendly relations with all countries<sup>20</sup>."

The growing conflict in the region between the United States and Iran has led regional players to take the role in calming the tensions fearing that the region will slip into war. Oman is one of the most important countries in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf because of its geographical location and neutral and balanced foreign policy. This has allowed Oman to take a prominent role in a region burdened by crises and Gulf burdened by tensions. At the same time, Oman and Sultan Haitham face several challenges, both internally and externally. Most important of which are:

On the internal level, Sultan Haitham faces economic challenges and the need to attract investments and strengthen the public and private sectors. He also needs to develop the army and expand recruitment and militarization. He has to tackle unemployment that requires unconventional solutions and modernizes the state's administrative apparatus.

On the external front, running Oman won't be easy because of the growing conflict and crises in the region, as well as the multiple alliances that surround the Sultanate. The new Sultan must work to confront these crises related to the national security of the Sultanate, especially the Yemeni war, the Qatari Gulf

crisis, and the repercussions of the US-Iranian conflict.

Oman's foreign policy and managing the state's internal problems will not differ much if Sultan Haitham succeeds in containing crises and managing the files with the sophistication and flexibility of the late Sultan Qaboos. In addition, maintaining the Sultanate's position regionally and internationally will not be easy given the growing role of Qatar in the region in containing crises and taking the mediating role. If the Sultanate is not fully prepared to preserve its prominent role that the late Qaboos drew, this will shake its regional position given the increasing Saudi-Emirati rapprochement in the Gulf and in North Africa. Perhaps the Sultanate of Oman will face new leadership challenges, and Sultan Haitham bin Tariq will be able to face these crises and dealing with the unstable southern borders because of the war in Yemen, and the coastal borders since Oman has the responsibility to protect the Gulf waters, and play an important role in protecting the international water if the conflict between the US and Iran renewed on one hand, and between these countries' allies on the other hand.

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