



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



In the Shadow of Qaboos: Contemplating Leadership Change in Oman

Gary A. Grappo

The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), established in 2014, is an independent, non-profit institution dedicated to increasing the understanding and appreciation of the social, economic, and political diversity of the Arab Gulf states. Through expert research, analysis, exchanges, and public discussion, the institute seeks to encourage thoughtful debate and inform decision makers shaping U.S. policy regarding this critical geo-strategic region.

© 2015 Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. All rights reserved.

AGSIW does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of AGSIW, its staff, or its Board of Directors.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from AGSIW. Please direct inquiries to:

Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington
1050 Connecticut Avenue, NW
STE 1060
Washington, DC 20036

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at www.agsiw.org.

Photo Credit: MOHAMMED MAHJOUN/AFP/Getty Images

About the Author

Gary A. Grappo is a former U.S. ambassador. He possesses nearly 40 years of diplomatic and public policy experience in a variety of public, private, and nonprofit endeavors. As a career member of the Senior Foreign Service of the U.S. Department of State, he served as Envoy and Head of Mission of the Office of the Quartet Representative, the Honorable Mr. Tony Blair, in Jerusalem. Grappo held a number of senior positions in the U.S. State Department, including Minister Counselor for Political Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad; U.S. Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman; and Charge d'Affaires and Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. From 2011-13, he was President and CEO of The Keystone Center. He currently serves as CEO of [Equilibrium International Consulting](#), providing analysis and policy guidance on foreign affairs to businesses, institutions, and the media.

June 3, 2015

In the Shadow of Qaboos: Contemplating Leadership Change in Oman

By Gary A. Grappo

Executive Summary

Concerns are growing about the health of Sultan Qaboos bin Said. Apprehension has spawned all matter of speculation about him, his continued reign in Oman, the mysterious succession process, and the future of this country of just over 4 million people on the far end of the Arabian Peninsula.

There is probably too much conjecture and outright guesswork about the Omani succession process and not enough about the genuine challenges that the sultanate and its people must face with Qaboos – however long he continues to govern – and ultimately under his successor.

A new successor will be chosen and regardless of who he might be, he will have to earn the loyalty and support of his subjects. The remarkable 45-year reign of Qaboos will make that task a daunting one for it is with Qaboos that he will be compared. Who could possibly measure up to the man who brought his country from poverty to comfortable affluence and from interminable internal conflict to a quiet and secure stability unknown in the sultanate for centuries?

Whoever he might be, Qaboos' successor will confront challenges nearly as great as those Qaboos faced in the first years of his reign in the early 1970s. Omanis today are much better educated and more engaged, and will want to see change. They will want to play a role in determining the direction of their country. They will also want and need to see a transformation in the country's economy away from dependence on comparatively sparse hydrocarbon reserves to other areas that will ensure the country's continued prosperity and standard of living and, most important, produce jobs for a rapidly growing population. These challenges coming from his people and the economic needs of the sultanate will test him.

The next sultan will also be tested – and very early, too – in foreign policy. Situated between the region's two giants, Saudi Arabia and Iran, he will be pulled in many directions. Each is fraught with risks as the region contends with an unprecedented number of crises: from a failed state looming in Libya and civil wars raging in Syria and neighboring Yemen, to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on the march in Syria and Iraq. Oman's Sunni Arab neighbors and others in the region fear an Iranian/Shia hegemon in the Middle East. Qaboos masterfully balanced his country's foreign policy, keeping it a friend to everyone and an enemy of none. His successor will come under acute pressure to start choosing Oman's friends more selectively.

Policy Recommendations: Arab Gulf States

- Give the new sultan his space. They should understand the need for him to earn the traditional bayah, or allegiance, from his people. Give him the time and space to do it in Oman's characteristic fashion.
- Carefully consider the long-term effect of losing Oman as a key interlocutor of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with Iran. The tendency might be to immediately pressure Oman to "return to the GCC fold" in terms of Iran policy to show GCC unity in the face of Iran's regional ambitions. That would be a mistake. Iran's relations with the world are changing and having a GCC insider to advance the council's interests will be valuable.
- Reassure the new sultan that his country's continued security, stability, and prosperity are key priorities of the GCC states, whether the source of instability is chaos in Yemen or Iranian mischief in the sultanate. Addressing Oman's security and other needs in the context of overall GCC security and stability will require that the GCC and its Western allies, e.g., the United States and Europe, coordinate and work closely together.

Policy Recommendations: United States

- Reach out quickly and from the highest level to the new sultan and convey continued U.S. support and strong cooperation on the economic and security fronts. As with the Gulf States, the United States must avoid pressuring the traditionally independent-minded Omanis. The United States was able to accept Qaboos charting his own path; it can do the same for his successor, particularly by reassuring him that his American ally will support him and his country.
- Invite the new sultan to Washington early, underscoring the vital importance of such a visit to the future of the Oman-U.S. relationship. Qaboos last visited the United States during the Reagan administration, despite having been invited by every president since then. (President Bill Clinton briefly met with Qaboos during a short stopover in Muscat in 2000.) There are many people he'll need to meet and get to know. Washington, the United States, and Oman are different than they were in 1983. Getting better acquainted will help identify new ways to strengthen security cooperation and economic ties. Learning to trust him, as the United States did Qaboos, will be essential; an early visit can begin that.
- Communicate that the United States stands ready to provide necessary support in the event of a spillover of Yemen hostilities into Oman or Iranian actions in the Musandam Peninsula guarding the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz.

The Omani Succession Black Box

Sultan Qaboos bin Said, according to media reports, is critically ill, reportedly from [cancer](#). Government pronouncements on the state of his health, however, have been spare. In March, Qaboos returned to Oman after eight months of receiving medical care in Germany. Despite his return, “in complete health” according to the Royal Court, Omanis and Oman’s friends around the world are left wondering about the heretofore stable sultanate’s future.

On paper, the succession appears rather straightforward. But it has never been implemented previously, having been devised in 1996 and updated by Qaboos subsequently. The plan is based not only on the traditions of the ruling Al Busaidi family – in power now for nearly two-and-three-quarter centuries – but also on Qaboos’ perceptions of what is needed to ensure smooth, efficient, and uncontentious successions and transitions.

Within three days of his passing, the ruling family council will convene to determine his successor. This raises the first succession question as the actual composition of the council is uncertain. That leaves Omanis and outsiders wondering what intra-family politicking regarding participation may already be taking place. The return of Qaboos to the country should serve to quash that for now.

If a successor cannot be chosen by the council, the National Defense Council, the chairmen of the Majlis Al Dawla and the Majlis Al Shura (the appointed State Council and elected Consultative Council) and three Supreme Court members will meet to open a letter addressed to the family council. They will verify Qaboos’ first and, if necessary, second choices in the respective letters, one identifying his first choice and the second, to be opened only in the event a decision on the first recommendation is not reached, identifying his second choice. When I met with the sultan in 2009, he confirmed that he had written the two letters and deposited each in separate locations. Only he is currently aware of each letter’s contents.

The family council will have to vote on the previous sultan’s recommendation(s). That raises questions. For example, will the family council be made aware of both names before voting on the sultan’s recommendation? Presumably they will not, but the possibility raises an intriguing question. If they ask and the names of both are made known to the family council, it would present an opportunity – some might say danger – of politicking in order to upend choice number one’s candidacy for the second choice. And if they ask but are not given the second name, will they insist to know both candidates before making their decision?

An even more intriguing complication is that if indeed he is as ill as some reports suggest, Qaboos might choose to change his earlier nomination letters or even abdicate in order to ensure the successor of his choice and an orderly transition. This may be the most hypothetical of theories but it offers certainty. It would effectively put Qaboos, whose decisions are not challenged, firmly in control of the process. Moreover, it would likely provide the greatest degree of confidence among Omanis as well as outsiders in the succession process.

Such a turn of events would not be unprecedented. In late 1998 ailing King Hussein of Jordan returned to his country after his cancer treatments in the United States proved futile. The king made what was effectively a deathbed decision, naming his son, Abdullah, as king over Crown Prince Hassan, who had been the designated successor for years. The appointment was accepted without question.

Before wandering too far down the speculative path, it's probably fair to say that one way or the other, there will be a successor who, regardless of who he may be, will face myriad challenges.

“He's Not Qaboos”

Perhaps the biggest challenge Qaboos' successor will face is earning the trust, confidence, and loyalty of the Omani people. This will be hard for the 80 percent of Oman's near-four million population who have never known anyone as ruler except Qaboos. Until very recently, few Omanis even considered the prospect of a sultan other than Qaboos. “We pray for him to live forever!” an Omani naively told me when asked to consider Oman under a different leader. It was indicative of the trust and faith placed in one man by his nation.

Therefore, the first uncertainty that Omanis will wrestle with in accepting their new leader will be that he isn't Qaboos. In fact, as one Omani diplomat once shared with me, “There will never be another Qaboos.”

He must first earn Omani loyalty, more formally known as bayah or pledge of loyalty or allegiance. Traditionally, this was done by meeting with the sheikhs of the major tribes in the country in order to win their support. Qaboos, after unseating his father in 1970, spent nearly a year doing just that, even avoiding the use of the title of sultan until he had obtained the needed pledges.

His successor may face an even greater challenge. In 1970, the tribes and the armed forces were about the only institutions of power in the country. Today, many more segments of the population have risen to prominence in national life and may want themselves heard; for example women, youth, business leaders, members of the two-chamber Majlis of Oman, and a far better educated, engaged, and savvy populace. Still, he cannot ignore the traditional Omani bases, the tribes and the much improved and professionalized armed forces. How the new sultan treats all of these groups and handles what could be a very different bayah process may determine how well and quickly Omanis line up behind him.

And in considering their support for him, Omanis will have to contemplate the suitability of the successor in light of the respect Qaboos earned during his years in power. A very senior U.S. official once confided to me that in his 40-plus years of involvement in foreign and national security matters, he had met only two leaders who possessed genuine vision: Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern-day Singapore, and Qaboos. Given the enormous impact Qaboos has had on Oman's progress over his 45-year reign, it is a fair comparison. Qaboos is the founder of modern Oman and his achievements are all the more remarkable given the volatile and unpredictable history of the Middle East, especially since the 1980s.

In terms of his impact on the country, one could liken him to the great caliphs of the Abbasid period in Arab history, the so-called “Golden Age of Islam” of the eighth and ninth centuries. Qaboos' vision, determination, and character probably reflect the best of classic Islamic history. He was no democrat but nevertheless sought to wield his power justly and progressively to advance and protect the interests of his country.

Vision will be the defining challenge of Qaboos' successor. Qaboos had a vision for Oman and it is reflected in virtually every aspect of the country's national life – security, stability, economic development, foreign affairs, monetary policy, administration, education, health, standard of living,

infrastructure, the role of women, the environment, architecture, culture, and the arts. Anyone who has visited the sultanate will recognize that none of it was by happenstance. It was planned, from the highly skilled balancing act of Omani foreign policy in a hyper-polarized and threatening region to the park-like, flower-festooned byways of its modern road and highway system. As the absolute monarch, he has ruled absolutely according to his plan, his vision.

Having witnessed this amazing feat of progress in their country, Omanis will want to know the new sultan's vision, and it should be as comprehensive as his predecessor's.

How Absolute a Monarchy?

One key question that will arise among Omanis and those close to Oman, although perhaps not necessarily spoken, is the authority of the new sultan.

Qaboos exercised virtually absolute authority, albeit relatively judiciously. Even when he began to devolve some very modest decision-making authority to the two houses of the Majlis of Oman and the judiciary and courts, there was no question that ultimate authority resided with him.

However, the public protests that erupted in 2011-12 as Oman experienced its own Arab Spring made it clear that Omanis want change. Qaboos responded with firings of officials and cabinet changes, and he stepped-up investment in the economy to produce more job opportunities for Omani youth, nearly 50 percent of whom are under the age of 24. He raised the minimum wage and created 50,000 new jobs, mostly in the armed forces and security services.

Oman's Basic Law drafted largely by the sultan in the years leading up to 1996, shows that Oman's issues may run deeper. All powers are effectively vested in the sultan. Until now, Omanis have largely trusted Qaboos. But what about after him? Given the massive changes in the country and Qaboos' mortality, do Omanis wish their sultan to continue to wield such overwhelming authority?

Few would suggest it's time to upend the monarchy or radically alter the sultan's authorities. In fact, to propose that authorities of the sultan should suddenly be moved to others would provoke chaos in a society that has become so accustomed to and dependent on the single decision maker. Neither Omani society nor the existing institutions of the Omani government are prepared for such a wholesale or even a significant transfer of power.

But one of the most demonstrative actions the new sultan could take is listening to people. During the demonstrations of 2011-12, there appeared to be less of that and more of rooting out supposed intrigue and subversion. Sadly, it bore many of the traits of other authoritarian regimes in the region, an image Qaboos struggled mightily to avoid.

In that light, the new sultan may wish to revive one of Qaboos' more popular practices, the "meet the people" tours. For many years, they were conducted annually but more recently every other year. The sultan would choose a particular area of the country to visit and camp for nearly a month, holding court with anyone wishing to speak with him and hosting dinners with local dignitaries, sheikhs, and citizens. In later years, however, they became heavily scripted and many suspected that genuine concerns relating to more weighty issues of governance, employment, and corruption were never raised.

Reviving such a practice, even in a different form, that would allow for genuine dialogue and expression

of views – with or without the sultan present to hear them – might be a healthy way to address public concerns. What must be overcome is the pervasive reluctance and even fear of bringing real problems to the sultan, to his key leaders, or even before the public for debate and discussion. Even ministers are hesitant to bring problems to him, including in the rare event they actually sit with him and speak face to face.

Gradual change may be necessary and ought to be possible. For example, currently Qaboos is prime minister, defense minister, finance minister, foreign affairs minister, and chair of the central bank. It may be time for the new sultan to shed such titles and some of the responsibilities that go with them. Naming a prime minister may be one action to consider seriously. Oman has not had a prime minister other than Qaboos since Sayyid Tariq bin Taimur Al Said in 1970-71. In Oman today, rumors circulate of Qaboos naming a prime minister. Maybe it's time to allow discussion of that appointment in the public.

In conjunction with such a move, Omanis might also look for greater devolution of decision-making authority to Oman's Majlis in conjunction with the cabinet. Allowing, for example, the Majlis to prepare and approve budgets for submission to the sultan might be a very good start.

The new sultan may also have to look at his government's overly restrictive policies on information and media. Oman's restrictions on media freedom breed rumor, speculation, and suspicion, as has happened with reporting on Qaboos' declining health or the 2011-12 demonstrations. It is counterproductive to the very order Qaboos has promoted. It is exacerbated when Omanis have limited access to international electronic and social media that provide snippets of what may or may not be happening. Greater transparency and openness ought to be one of the new sultan's top priorities.

Similarly, the new monarch must recognize that Omanis want to play a greater role in their society. That means reviewing his government's very restrictive policies on civil society institutions. Starting such organizations, however apolitical they may seem, e.g., professional organizations, women's groups, environmental organizations, etc., require lengthy application procedures through multiple government institutions and long waiting periods. Even when their applications are approved – often because the organization's leaders have wisely sought the patronage of a royal family member or senior government official – civil society organizations must tread ever so gingerly in their activities to avoid being shut down.

A healthier climate that nurtures civil society institutions will provide for greater communication among the Omani public, the government, and the rest of society and contribute to improved transparency and greater public confidence.

Oman may be the Arab world's most religiously tolerant state, as much a result of Oman's majority Ibadi Muslim reputation for tolerance as Qaboos' live-and-let-live approach. Virtually a hundred percent of Oman's citizens are Muslims, but its Christian and Hindu expatriate communities worship freely at churches and temples built on land donated by the sultan. Ibadi, Sunni, and Shia Omanis are represented throughout the government, including the bicameral Majlis and the judiciary.

With the rest of the region becoming increasingly polarized along religious lines, especially Sunni and Shia, the new sultan may be challenged to keep Oman where it is – relatively stable and religiously tolerant. Qaboos disliked religious zealots and was able to steer Omani society well clear of the turbulent waters of sectarianism. If Oman is to maintain its reputation for tolerance and enjoy domestic

tranquility and international respectability, Qaboos' successor will have to chart a similar course. That will mean resisting those seeking to move in a more conservative direction. Such strains still exist in Oman's interior and occasionally make themselves known, as was the case recently when 84 percent of the Shura Council voted for a country-wide alcohol ban, a sure-fire recipe for curbing the country's tourism and transportation plans.

Finally, while the new sultan must show himself to be progressive, he must also be a preserver of Oman's unique cultural heritage. Omanis of all stripes –Ibadi, Sunni, or Shia; urban or desert dwellers; fishermen or software designers – cherish their culture. Women wearing the several unique Omani styles of the hijab (hair cover), the men with their colorful mussar (headwear) and elaborately decorated khanjar (dagger), the traditional serving of the bitter Arabic coffee with helwa (rich concoction of sugar, ghee, and spices) and dates to guests and the accompanying story telling, and the many styles of sturdy sailing and fishing vessels are a few symbols of a culture and history at least two-thousand years old. Omanis want progress and development but they do not wish to turn their backs on a culture they embrace enthusiastically. Given that the sultan stands as a symbol of that culture, his subjects will expect him to respect it as strongly as they do and preserve it.

Moving Off Hydrocarbon Dependency Toward Economic Diversification

Addressing Oman's economic challenges will also rank high on the new sultan's agenda. Given the youth bulge, which isn't expected to diminish any time soon, the sultan must look for ways to create employment opportunities for Omanis outside the public arena and still continue Oman's impressive record of economic growth.

Omani GDP per capita registered extraordinary gains under Qaboos. When he took power from his deposed father in 1970, it was among the lowest in the world at [\\$350](#). In 2013, it had reached nearly [\\$23,000](#). Oman's GDP rose from \$256 million to nearly \$80 billion over the same period as the country capitalized on its comparatively limited but nevertheless commercially attractive reserves of oil and gas. Oman today owes its economic prosperity to oil and gas and to Qaboos' prudent management of those limited resources.

Oman might be able to continue to rely on oil and gas for a while yet. But its oil reserves of [5.5 billion](#) barrels and gas reserves of 900 billion cubic meters pale in comparison to the 266 billion barrels of neighboring Saudi Arabia and 24.7 trillion cubic meters of reserves of fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member Qatar. No one should expect the kind of economic surge seen in the Qaboos years to continue long into the future. Forecasts for oil and gas prices indicate that they may never return to the heady days of 2000-09. The United States' and other countries' oil and gas resources increasingly will come on line as a result of hydraulic fracking and increased supplies. Moreover, developed countries continue to ramp up their development of renewable energy technologies to replace fossil fuels.

In 2013, oil and gas proceeds accounted for 86 percent of the budget revenue and 45 percent of GDP, according to Oman's National Center for Statistics and Information. In fact, at prices of around \$50 per barrel, the country already runs a budget deficit. So, continued reliance on oil and gas is not economically sustainable.

But it is even less sustainable socially. Oman's current unemployment rate ranges between 15 and 18

percent; youth unemployment has been estimated between 20 and 33 percent. Omani youth, those primarily involved in the demonstrations of 2011-12, will judge the new sultan on his ability to create employment for them and also the opportunities to enjoy a lifestyle and standard of living at least as good as that of their parents' generation.

Oil and gas income over the years has allowed Oman to create a bureaucracy large enough to absorb significant numbers of workers from Oman's fast growing population. Today, 65 to 70 percent of Omani workers are employed in the public sector. That's down from over 80 percent 15 years ago but still not viable. Future job growth must come from the private sector.

It may also come from reducing the number of expatriate workers in the country. In 2013, Omanis constituted just 225,000 of the 1.5 million private sector employees, according to the Ministry of Manpower. The ministry wants to reduce the sultanate's overall expat work force to 33 percent from its current level of nearly 40 percent. Efforts toward "Omanization" of the workforce date back to the mid-1990s but have been met with frustrating results. Omanis will want to see the new sultan do better.

More than 10 years ago, Oman opened itself to tourism, a wise decision given the sultanate's recognized beauty, hospitality, and safety. The several four- and five-star resorts now present have created many new jobs in the hospitality industry, especially for women.

Similarly, its foray into the transportation and logistics sector has had impressive success with the Salalah container port. In operation only 17 years, it already ranks among the top 40 container ports worldwide. Oman is in the midst of launching its second grand transportation and logistics project in Duqm, about 300 miles south of Muscat. When completed, its Special Economic Zones will host the Middle East's second largest dry dock, an international airport, refinery, petrochemical facility, beach-front hotels, and housing for more than 100,000 residents. The government has teamed with the Antwerp Port Consortium of Belgium in this mega-project. Both Salalah and Duqm should also be able to capitalize on the planned GCC rail network.

If these undertakings in tourism, transportation, and logistics are to continue successfully, Oman will have to remain a very stable country. Moreover, these much needed diversification efforts must produce significant employment opportunities for Omanis. The question is will these opportunities be filled by Omanis, or by expats. Outside investors and business interests will want employees at competitive labor rates with the requisite skills. It will also mean raising Omani worker productivity, which has lagged of late. Previously, this has often meant hiring foreign workers. Simply decreeing that employees must be Omanis will drive foreign interests away. Therefore, the next sultan and his government will need to ensure that Omanis have such skills, including technical and language, to fill those jobs productively. That in turn will require increased investment in quality education and training for Omanis.

Maintaining the Middle East's Oasis of Stability

In addressing the aforementioned challenges, the new sultan can likely count on the general atmosphere of goodwill and trust engendered by Qaboos and the patient and tolerant temperament of the Omani people.

However, he will not enjoy such a luxury from outside of Oman when it comes to foreign policy and

national security. Qaboos' policy – a friend to all, a very close friend to a very few, and an enemy to none – will likely be tested from the outset.

Qaboos was well aware of his fragile country's vulnerability and ensured he became good friends with some, especially the United States and United Kingdom. Moreover, he managed to keep Oman a member, if not always a compliant one, of various regional organizations like the Arab League and GCC. Aware of the sultanate's exposed position between the region's two titans, Saudi Arabia and Iran, he worked especially hard through calm and crisis at maintaining friendly terms with both, especially the always temperamental and difficult Iranians.

To everyone, however, it was clear that Qaboos would pursue his country's unique brand of independence. He was able to maintain this complicated approach to Omani foreign policy by force of will, intellect, calculated judgement of his country's needs and capabilities, and hard-earned respect from all.

His successor might do the same. But in view of the urgent challenges he will face at the outset, it will be difficult.

He should expect all manner of pressure from fellow GCC leaders to "fall in line" with the GCC's Iran policy. That policy has been significantly more adversarial than Oman has been comfortable with under Qaboos. Especially with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action concluded in early April by the P5+1 with Iran and a final agreement possibly to follow by the end of June, the GCC has a strong interest in developing a unified position in its response. The strong, public statement of support for the nuclear negotiations that emerged from the Camp David Summit in May reflected this interest, and enabled the GCC to avoid a situation in which Oman would have been forced to choose between standing with its closest allies or stepping away from a process that it helped midwife by hosting a secret meeting between U.S. and Iranian officials in 2013.

Qaboos has not shied from taking dramatic steps when, in his view, they might improve the chances of peace and stability in the region. In 1979, after the conclusion of the Camp David Peace Accord between Egypt and Israel, Qaboos was the first Arab leader to endorse it. The decision led to Oman's expulsion from the Arab League. Qaboos did not flinch, however, and soon his government was invited to return.

Similarly, in the mid-1990s, when many in the region and elsewhere believed that a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians was imminent, his government opened private talks with Israel and, in late 1974, even invited Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to Muscat for a private visit. The visit and subsequent private talks eventually led to the openings of trade representative offices in each country. Many saw the invitation and visit as Oman's de facto recognition of Israel. Qaboos saw the opportunity for peace and a modest role he could play in support of it, to the dismay of his Arab brethren.

Western friends would also grimace at Qaboos' foreign policy. His unconventionally close but cautious relationship with Iran did not sit well with the West, especially the United States. Nevertheless, it was tolerated and eventually provided an often-used communication channel for Washington with Tehran, from the delivery of messages, to hostage-release negotiations and, most recently, the opening of nuclear talks between the bitterly opposed sides.

Since the Arab Spring, stability in the Middle East has moved from unsettled to precarious. From Libya

to Yemen, Syria to ISIL, serious threats loom. The more stable states like Oman and the rest of the GCC are wrestling with unprecedented challenges on multiple fronts. Saudi Arabia, joined by the rest of the GCC, has taken a strong position on all of these matters, calling for the removal of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and leading a coalition against the Houthis in Yemen. Oman under Qaboos has been circumspect.

Yemen is but the latest example of Oman treading its own path. Not surprisingly, Oman has shied from joining the Saudi-led coalition battling the Houthi rebels in Yemen. It is the only GCC member-state to sit the conflict out. Yemen is the best example of the more muscular defense policy staked out by Saudi Arabia, the GCC, and other Arab states in light of Washington's perceived turn away from its traditional Arab allies toward a new relationship with Iran – viewed by Arabs as the preeminent regional threat – and demotion of the region's importance.

Given Arab fears of Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the region, momentum is building. Saudi Arabia, the rest of the GCC, Egypt, and Jordan have closed ranks against Iran. They will pressure the new sultan to get on board. That pressure, especially from the Saudis, will be intense. The Iranians, doubtlessly offering trade opportunities and energy deals, will push back. Will the new sultan be able, or willing, to manage the same balancing act?

Iran's newfound drive in the region could have a significant impact on Oman. Further chaos in Yemen, for example, could trigger an influx of more Yemeni refugees fleeing the conflict across Oman's remote and porous 180 mile long border with Yemen, a decades-long apprehension of the Omani leadership and security services. ISIL and al-Qaeda successes in Yemen might stir extremist commotion in Oman, perhaps sparked by refugees. Oman's touted stability may be at risk.

The Omanis also harbor a healthy suspicion of Iran – which they should after three occupations – but such a transparently aggressive posture as presented by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states would be inconsistent with Qaboos' independent foreign policy and simply uncharacteristic of the Omanis. Nevertheless, Oman understands its susceptibility to Iranian mischief, for example, in the geographically separate and strategically vital area of Musandam, which stands guard over the navigable portion of the Strait of Hormuz.

Qaboos, relying on long-held Omani traditions as a country of seafarers and traders, believed that good trade makes good partners. Oman signed a Free Trade Agreement with the United States in 2006, which was implemented in 2009. It also established strong trade ties with the European Union, India, China, Japan, South Korea, and other countries, cementing its valued status as a politically and economically stable state. Can the new sultan preserve these ties and still steer a new course – or maintain the current one – in Omani foreign policy?

Conclusion

The challenges of Qaboos' successor will be many. Identifying him should not be one of them. More attention ought to be given to the many more serious problems that touch the lives of Omanis. In a region wracked by tension, conflict, and growing dissatisfaction with the status quo, Oman's new sultan will need to look not only to the foresight, judgment, and determination of his predecessor but also to the wisdom as well as many desires and needs of his people.

