

SIMMERING UNREST AND SUCCESSION CHALLENGES IN OMAN

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About the Author

Marc Valeri is a senior lecturer of political economy at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies (IAIS) and director of the Center for Gulf Studies at the University of Exeter. His current research focuses on the social, political, and economic transformations in the Gulf monarchies as well as nation building and political legitimacy in the Sultanate of Oman since 1970.

He was a Jean Monnet Fellow at the European University Institute of Florence from 2005 to 2006 and Marie Curie Research Fellow at the IAIS from 2007 to 2009. In 2009–2010, Valeri was a teaching fellow in politics and constitutional law at the University of La Rochelle (France) and was concomitantly honorary research fellow at the IAIS.



Summary

The uncertain health of the sultan of Oman has heightened concern about the future of the country, the most personalized of all Gulf monarchies. Many Omanis have long equated the country with its ruler, Qaboos bin Said Al Said, who won their loyalty by building up a state and a national identity centered on himself. However, amid mounting popular frustration, criticism of Qaboos has emerged, as has anxiety about what will follow his reign. There are several measures the regime can undertake to avoid further unrest.

A New Environment

- The Omani model of political legitimacy is intimately linked to Qaboos. But the country's young population feels less indebted to the ruler, and an increasingly vocal civil society has been complaining about deep-seated flaws in the state he built after taking power in 1970.
- In 2011 and 2012, most major towns saw peaceful protests by Omanis demanding higher salaries, better living conditions, substantial political reforms, and the end of corruption.
- The regime responded with a combination of economic gestures, firings of some top officials, and the detention of peaceful activists. Since 2012, repressive measures have become more prominent, with new investments in the security sector and crackdowns on dissonant voices.
- Political parties are prohibited in Oman and, despite some cosmetic reforms, nearly all power remains with the monarch.
- While the protests did not initially target the sultan, criticism of Qaboos and his practices has become more common. Protesters are worried about the future of the country and are speaking out on its behalf.

Changes Are Needed to Avoid Further Unrest

Oman's leaders should recognize that the environment has changed. Young Omanis will not be willing to grant the next ruler the same degree of control that their parents granted Qaboos. Instead, Qaboos's successor is likely to face renewed demands for reform.

Limits on civil society should be relaxed. Rather than actively harassing and repressing peaceful alternative voices, the regime should encourage civil society organizations, a step toward allowing some public participation in governance.

Answers to political uncertainties should be provided. The regime's reluctance to appoint a prime minister or a crown prince with some executive powers and to prepare for a post-Qaboos Oman has only fueled popular anxiety over the perceived lack of a long-term economic and political vision for the country. If the current ruler does not provide answers to these questions soon, the uncertainty could provoke considerable turmoil in the event of Qaboos's sudden demise.

Introduction

The sultan of Oman traveled to Germany to receive medical care in July 2014. His prolonged stay since then has revived concerns across Omani society about the future of the country without the “father of the nation.”¹ A taped, four-minute television address in early November by Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said—who looked emaciated and expressed regret that he was unable to return home for National Day celebrations later in the month—failed to silence rumors of cancer that have been circulating in the Gulf since he left the country.

The anxiety about the health of the seventy-four-year-old ruler, who has no designated heir, came as the supposed “sleepy sultanate,”² long thought to be a model of stability, was affected by the winds of protest blowing across the region.

In 2011 and 2012, the sultanate of Oman experienced its widest popular protests since the 1970s and the end of the Dhofar war, in which the southern region rose up against Qaboos’s father, who then ruled the country.³ Peaceful sit-ins that went on for two months in early 2011, and sustained mobilizations calling for political reforms in the summer of 2012, illustrated the depth of the frustration and social malaise in the country. The protesters’ key demands included expanded job opportunities, curbs on corruption among top officials, and programs to combat increasing inequality. In the vast majority of cases, the ruler was not their target.

The regime’s response—a combination of economic concessions, modest political reforms, and tough security measures—was not enough to quell the protests. Furthermore, the government’s unwillingness to break the taboo on key issues such as the concentration of power in the sultan’s hands and the need to establish the foundations for governance of a post-Qaboos Oman also revealed new tensions, as young activists began to make a distinction between the current regime and the Omani nation.

That connection between Qaboos and the state has been at the heart of his rule since the sultan took power in 1970. Relying on the country’s oil revenues, the sultan asserted his legitimacy by implementing an ambitious policy of national unification and by creating a vast pool of civil servants who depended on the regime for their survival. Alongside that, the 1996 Basic Law sanctions a paternalistic state whose guide is the sultan, “the symbol of national unity as well as its guardian and defender,” who concurrently holds the positions of prime minister, commander in chief of the armed forces, chairman of the central bank, and minister of defense, foreign affairs, and finance. Only a handful of individuals have direct access to the ruler, who has made clear since 2011 that he intends to remain the sole arbiter of national priorities.

While the protests in Oman have obviously not developed with the same intensity and on the same scale as other uprisings in the Arab world, they have revealed how this hypercentralized model has long since reached its limits.

The Omani Spring is the most serious alarm bell rung by a population that is both increasingly unable to meet the requirements of daily life and aware of the prospect of a challenging future without the paternal figure of Qaboos.⁴ This brutal collision with reality marks the beginning of a new chapter in Oman's history.

The Foundations of Contemporary Oman

Qaboos is the fourteenth ruler of the al-Busaidi dynasty of Oman. He overthrew his father Said bin Taimur with the help of British advisers in 1970, when about fifteen years of civil war had been highlighting the social and political divisions of a territory marked by extreme international isolation. The new ruler, who was not yet thirty years old, inherited a territory without a state. His room to maneuver with regard to the British was reduced to a minimum, and so was his legitimacy vis-à-vis the Omanis. He thus immediately faced the need to assert the legitimacy of his accession to the throne by defining a

new order for which he alone would hold the keys. The new regime's strategy of legitimization linked the country's economic and social development to the state, on the one hand, and to the person of the sultan, who has since become the subject of a personality cult, on the other.

The regime's approach was based on the exploitation of a newly significant oil rent. The inexhaustible pool of jobs offered by the public sector, following the explosion of oil revenues, represented a decisive step in confirming the sultan's political legitimacy and hence his sociopolitical grip.

Thousands of new state employees in the national army, the police, the intelligence service, the ministries, and other parts of government were, for several decades, the most reliable and pragmatic allies of the ruler.

Moreover, thanks to new, paved roads, and to schools and health centers that were built in even the smallest villages, the state materially and symbolically came to occupy all of its territory. It suddenly became a concrete reality—the interlocutor for all government activity and the stage for all social and political actors. As a result, since the late 1970s, not only have a large majority of Omanis been dependent on the state for their own subsistence, but any alternative to the sultan has had no credibility.

A new official historiography has been built around Qaboos and the welfare state, one that ignores both the explosion in oil revenue that made it possible and the political continuity before and after 1970. The contemporary national identity is built on the negation of the country's pre-1970 history, which is

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never mentioned other than to contrast it with the glorious “national awakening” of July 23, 1970, the date of Qaboos’s accession to the throne, later renamed Renaissance Day (*id al-nahda*).

This political rewriting of history, in which the ruler is omnipresent, marks an attempt to naturalize the special pantheon—the contemporary sultanate of Oman, the welfare state, and the person of Sultan Qaboos himself—that has been the basis for the current regime’s legitimacy. All major contemporary urban achievements bear the sultan’s name. He is glorified in the national anthem and on National Day—the sultan’s birthday. The extreme personalization of Oman’s political power is also seen in the country’s political system. In 1975, sultan’s decree number 26/75 established that the sultan is “the source of all laws” (*masdar al-qawanin*). Since then, all Omani legislation has been promulgated through sultan’s decrees—including the Basic Law of the State, issued in November 1996.

The extreme personalization of Oman’s political system since 1970 accustomed many Omanis to the idea that the fate of all Qaboos’s subjects depends on his goodwill. A climate of national unanimity predominated in the media and in officials’ public speeches, while Omanis have been told for forty years to rely on the reassuring paternal figure of the sultan to resolve all public matters. Even cabinet members have been afraid to speak up and displease the ruler, as they have operated in a culture of political insecurity that has been maintained in order to ensure everyone has internalized the fact that no position can be taken for granted. As a retired senior civil servant explained:

When you speak to ministers or to high officials, they know the problems better than you. But they don’t want to hear because they are afraid. . . . They have not seen the sultan for one, two, three years, and they feel totally isolated. They don’t trust anybody and they don’t want to take the risk of making you believe that they are weak or vulnerable.⁵

This isolation means that very few people are willing or able to report issues to the ruler. Local observers explain, for instance, that a number of ministers were dismissed in March 2011, well after the start of protests around the country, because they were afraid to report the actual situation on the ground, worried that they would be reprimanded or lose face and position.

Civil wars in Yemen or Iraq, as well as the political instability in Kuwait and Bahrain, have frequently been used to put the extreme personalization of power in Muscat in perspective. As the explanation goes, despite the system’s imperfections, Omani political stability is still preferable to the state of entropy in neighboring countries.

Similarly, the idea that supposedly liberal leaders have to face a tribal and conservative society is used as a misleading but handy excuse to justify, especially to their U.S. and European counterparts, any delays in political liberalization. The argument that the people are “not mature for Western-type democracy” was used by Qaboos in 1973 to justify the personalization of his

rule,⁶ and he repeated it almost word for word in 1997: “The man in the street often doesn’t want or know how to deal with foreign governments or defend the country. He trusts me to do it. . . . In this part of the world, giving too much power too fast can still be exploited. Elections in many countries mean having the army prevent bloodshed. Is this democracy? Are these happy countries? . . . No. They are really just power struggles. I am against creating such situations when people aren’t ready for them.”⁷

Deep-Seated Issues

Oman’s *état de grâce* has long since come to an end. While regional dynamics clearly had an impact on the events that shook the sultanate after 2011, a series of domestic challenges have been calling into question the Omani sociopolitical order for more than fifteen years.

The Omani population is one of the youngest in the world: 45 percent of nationals were less than twenty years old and 56 percent were less than twenty-five in 2013.⁸ As this huge contingent of young people joins the labor market, the economy remains extremely dependent on oil-derived revenue. In 2013, the oil and natural gas sectors accounted for 45 percent of the Omani gross domestic product (GDP) and 86 percent of government revenues.⁹

A series of domestic challenges have been calling into question the Omani sociopolitical order for more than fifteen years.

Given Oman’s limited oil and gas resources compared to its neighbors, a long-term economic program was established in 1995 that included economic diversification among its goals. Under Oman 2020: Vision for Oman’s Economy, the oil sector’s share of the country’s GDP was to fall from 41 percent in 1996 to 9 percent by 2020, while that of nonoil industries was to increase from 7.5 percent to 29 percent. Separately, the sixth (2001–2005) and seventh (2006–2010) five-year plans emphasized development in three main areas: the gas sector, tourism, and non-oil industries. This policy also focused on the private sector as “the main contributor of growth,”¹⁰ and it aimed to both attract foreign capital and support the role of local companies in economic diversification.

Another priority of the Oman 2020 economic road map was human resources and employment. The rates of nationals working in the public and private sectors was to increase from 68 percent to 95 percent and from 7.5 percent to 75 percent, respectively, while the share of expatriates in the whole population was to be reduced from 25 percent in 1995 to 15 percent by 2020.

However, policies favoring Omani nationals in employment have had limited results, and the process of diversifying sources of revenue has been slow. This is illustrated by Oman’s dramatic social inequalities, endemic unemployment, and poverty, all results of recent deregulation and privatization policies.

When protests started in January 2011, estimates at the national level showed a persistent 20 percent unemployment rate among nationals—and

it was certainly above 25 percent among eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds. These figures leave unacknowledged what is probably a considerable rate of underemployment, particularly in rural areas. In February 2011, the proportion of Omanis employed in the private sector and earning less than the official monthly minimum wage (about \$520, or 200 Omani rials¹¹) was 70 percent.¹²

Moreover, the personal involvement of most influential decisionmakers and cabinet members in business has fueled the widespread perception of an elite busy safeguarding its privileges while silencing questions about the conflict between the nation's general interests they are supposed to promote—such as Omanization policies of employment—and the particular stakes they defend as businessmen. The sultan has not prevented Oman's merchant families from taking political positions and actively participating in the setting of economic priorities. Qaboos has never been willing to rely on his small family, leading him to ally with the traditional Muscat merchant elites, who have been assured privileged access to the oil windfall through public contracts. In return, the merchant families have helped the ruler to finance his nation-building endeavors. Thus some members of preeminent merchant families have been given strategic positions from which they control the distribution of the country's oil wealth. At the same time, as the oil rent has profoundly changed the boundaries between politics and the economy, many ministers whose families were not active in the economy before Qaboos's rule have become personally rich.

This process has not been questioned by the ruler, as it has increased both the elites' loyalty to him and the stability of his rule. The symbolic debt owed by Qaboos at the beginning of his rule to those who supported him after 1970 has thus gradually turned into a weapon in his hands, forestalling any challenges to his reign by turning them into unfailing allies. On the eve of the Arab Spring, few ministers had not personally derived material profit from the oil rent.¹³ From this point of view, rather than encouraging economic mobility, which could call into question the established authoritarian order and contribute to a renewal—or at least a revitalization—of the socioeconomic fabric, recent privatization and diversification policies have only confirmed Oman's established social and economic hierarchy.

All these trends helped create fertile ground for the development of political grievances. In 2005, employees of Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat, as well as senior military and civilian officials, were arrested, leading to prison sentences for more than 70 people. Those arrested all belonged to the Ibadi school, the third major doctrinal division in Islam (together with the Sunni and Shia branches), which is estimated to constitute just over half of the Omani population.¹⁴ The public prosecution accused them of having been members of a banned secret organization that was established in the north of the country. A public group thought to be affiliated with the organization ran youth summer camps and an underground wing was accused of attempting to overthrow the regime by force in order to establish an Ibadi imamate. The accused denied

that the organization had a political dimension and they focused on its religious character and goals, and on the shared desire of its members to “defend the Ibadi doctrine.”¹⁵

Meanwhile, embryos of civil society, composed of young Omanis who thought their strong educations should allow them to have a voice in the decisionmaking process, started developing—an early, overt sign that growing sectors of society were reluctant to guarantee the perpetuation of a system that excluded them from political and economic decisions. New Internet forums opened in the mid-2000s, and most participants chose to use their real names, even when tackling sensitive issues, with the declared aim of promoting new social and political debates in Omani society. Despite the systematic harassment and arrests of Internet activists, online accounts of allegedly fraudulent practices by key figures of the regime (but not the ruler) became common. In summer 2010, intellectuals and human rights activists took the opportunity of the 40th anniversary of Qaboos’s accession to the throne to submit an online petition to the ruler calling for wide-scale reforms, such as a new constitution that would lead to a parliamentary monarchy and measures against corruption among top officials.

Breaking the Fear Barrier

These warning signs of the approaching storm should have been interpreted by the authorities as such. However, the general climate of frustration that sparked the fire in 2011 caught the regime by surprise.

On January 17, 2011, 200 people assembled in Muscat to protest against government corruption and economic hardship. This was followed in February by a series of nationwide protests, each attended by several hundred people demonstrating against low salaries, high unemployment, and the lack of legislative powers permitted to the Consultative Council, which had been elected by universal suffrage since 2003.

In late February 2011, in the northern town of Sohar, in Oman’s Batinah region, young unskilled people from neighboring cities who had been told once again that no jobs were available for them started a sit-in at the local branch of the Ministry of Manpower. They were evacuated by the police, arrested at night, and taken to the town’s central prison. When the news spread, skirmishes developed around Sohar’s police station and one protester was shot dead. From that moment on, Sohar’s Globe Roundabout, renamed “Reform Square” (*maydan al-islah*), became the gathering place of the protesters. Sit-ins, which went on for two months, were organized simultaneously in front of the governor’s offices in Salalah, the main town in the southern governorate of Dhofar, and in the eastern town of Sur.

For the first time since the end of the Dhofar war in the late 1970s, the expression of alternative ideas and informed criticism of state policies was

intruding on the streets. Until this point, no latitude of action had been tolerated for critics, in the name of preserving national unity behind the ruler and preventing the threat of *fitna* (division). There was also an understanding that authorities would use force only in a limited way, in exchange for the people's total noninvolvement in political issues. This tacit arrangement had given credence to the idea that "the cost of resisting injustice outweigh[s] that of resignation to it."¹⁶ And it had confirmed for most Omanis that politics is a dangerous game and that it is possible to enjoy a very satisfying life if they do not meddle in it.

The fact that the most important demonstrations took place in the town of Sohar, which has a rich trade history going back thousands of years, is highly symbolic. Until the early 2000s, Sohar remained a rural provincial town, neglected, like other regional centers, by the post-1970 modernization process. The lack of employment opportunities in northern Oman (besides local branches of government and other public sector posts) helps explain why many Omani nationals from Batinah were highly represented in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) security forces until the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹⁷

In this context, the government's decision to establish an industrial site and free zone—conceived by the regime to be an international showcase of the country's economic diversification—was seen as a godsend in Sohar. For a planned total investment of \$15 billion, the site, which has been in service since 2002, was officially projected to generate more than 8,000 direct jobs and another 30,000 indirectly in the region by 2015.

Yet as Sohar changed over just a few years from a small, sleepy provincial town to the industrial capital of the country, its social fabric disintegrated. Inequalities exploded, with pockets of wealth (including luxury gated townships reserved for expatriate executives of industrial groups doing business at the port) contrasting sharply with the rest of the area, where residents had no access to the economic benefits of the development and experienced a stagnation or a diminution of their living standards due to the cost increases that accompanied it. Pollution created by industries in the Sohar port also helped trigger local popular frustrations. Epitomizing the tensions brought on by the excessive profits that a few regime insiders accumulated during the town's economic boom, Sohar's main supermarket, Lulu, whose building and land belonged to the minister of royal office, Ali al-Maamari, was ransacked and burned down in late February.

The now famous "The people want the fall of the regime" sung in Tunis and Cairo was appropriated in Oman in 2011, where it was converted to "The people want the reform (*islah*) of the regime" and "The people want the fall of corruption" (*isqat al-fasad*). Other slogans ("Yes to a new Oman," "We need freedom," and "You may restrict our hands but you cannot restrict our dreams in a better life") openly asked for change. Strikes and demonstrations that quickly sprouted up all over the country revolved around demands for more job opportunities and measures to curb rising prices and inequalities.

Protesters also called on the sultan to personally intervene to end the reign of *wasta* (favoritism) and corruption in the public sector and to put long-serving ministers who were widely perceived as corrupt on trial.

In Muscat, a sit-in led by intellectuals and human rights activists in front of the Consultative Council marked a symbolic refusal to endorse an elected body that was without real power. Demonstrators also called for free and open media; the promulgation of a constitution to replace the Basic Law and guarantee the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers; and, above all, the appointment of a prime minister. Meanwhile, accounts of harassment by security forces and violations of basic human rights, as well as denunciations of what critics called a security and police state (*dawla al-amn wa-l-bulis*), mushroomed on the Internet. As one intellectual who participated in the Muscat sit-in explained in 2012, “Omanis were not silent by choice before 2011, rather they were silenced by the regime. The Omani population was very quiet because of repression and fear: ‘Don’t talk about politics: you will be taken behind the sun!’ In 2011, they have managed to break free from the sultanate of fear.”¹⁸

More generally, while the protests around the country were primarily motivated by social and economic issues, two other dimensions are noteworthy. First, although the mobilizations were not organized along sectarian lines or focused on sectarian demands, Islamists played a crucial role in channeling discontent—probably not so much for the attractiveness of their ideologies per se, but rather because they offered one of the few easily identifiable counter-discourses and forms of collective organization. The influence of underground Muslim Brotherhood cells and networks was visible in the Sur, Salalah, and Sohar protests, and that of the Salafis could be seen in several Batinah protests, particularly those in Sohar and Shinas.¹⁹ All of these groups, in addition to Ibadis and a significant component of young secular intellectuals, managed to coordinate efficiently, especially in Sohar.

Second, the Dakhiliyah (Interior) region, the stronghold of the Ibadi imamate, where poverty is probably as common as it is in Batinah and Dhofar, remained untouched by the Omani Spring. More than an Ibadi particularism, this immunity is likely explained by Oman’s twentieth-century history. In the 1950s a conflict arose between the Ibadi imamate, which had controlled the interior of Oman since 1920, and Sultan Said bin Taimur, who was backed by Britain and whose full sovereignty was restricted to Batinah, Muscat, and Salalah. As an Internet activist from the Dakhiliyah region explained, “The memory of the war in the 1950s, when the Sultan’s Armed Forces and the British destroyed the imamate, is still alive. People in Inner Oman remember how bad the al-Busaidis were and know they are all alike,” leaving them hesitant to challenge the current sultan. This is probably not the case in Dhofar, where “they have this same memory of the war against the sultan, but it is different because this memory is a good one,” the activist said. “They won the war and pushed out Qaboos’s father.”²⁰

Given this historical legacy, Qaboos has always been very careful not to alienate Inner Oman. In particular, tribal and religious leaders from the region have been given prominent positions in the new state and have easy access to central authority. People from Inner Oman are overrepresented in all security forces, and in the ministries of interior, justice, and heritage and culture. Thus, the feeling of abandonment by the central state experienced in the Batinah and among other communities since 1970 has been less pronounced in the Dakhiliyah region.

Furthermore, unlike in Sohar and Salalah, where the social fabric has suffered dramatically from the quick transformation from provincial towns into industrial cities, the traditional social organization remains solid in Inner Oman. This has so far succeeded in balancing the growing inequalities and frustrations brought on by a poorly executed modernization. Both the mufti of Oman, who is an Ibadi from Dakhiliyah, and the Ibadi religious establishment are highly respected, and their statements since 1970, unfailingly in favor of the preservation of the social and political order, have hardly been contested.

These factors, combined with the memory of the 2005 wave of arrests among Ibadi activists, help explain the absence of protests in Inner Oman. But in Sohar, Muscat, and elsewhere, the protests thrived, and the regime was forced to respond.

People from Inner Oman are overrepresented in all security forces, and in the ministries of interior, justice, and heritage and culture.

The Regime Reacts

Faced with growing discontent, the regime took several steps to appease the protesters. The private sector minimum wage for nationals was increased by 43 percent to about \$520 (200 Omani rials) in mid-February 2011. Sultan Qaboos made further concessions on February 27, including the introduction of a monthly allowance (about \$390, or 150 Omani rials) for job seekers, the creation of 50,000 new jobs for Omanis in the public sector (predominantly in the defense and security sectors), the doubling of the monthly social security allowance for eligible needy families, and an increase in student allowances.

In early March, in the largest cabinet reorganization in forty years, Sultan Qaboos dismissed one-third of his cabinet, including Ali al-Maamari; the minister of national economy, Ahmed Makki; and the minister of commerce and industry, Maqbool al-Sultan. Those decisions were intended to publicly reaffirm the sultan's centrality when it comes to embodying both national unity and the struggle against corruption. While positively received, they did little to dull the protesters' resoluteness, much the same way that gestures toward Islamists, including the sultan's approval of the establishment of Islamic banks, in May 2011, had little effect.

Later in March, the sultan announced his intention to expand the powers of the advisory Council of Oman, which is composed of the elected Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*) and an appointed State Council (*Majlis al-Dawla*), and, until this point, had a very limited role. But as Saudi and UAE forces entered Bahrain to help quell protests there, it became clear that Qaboos, like his counterparts in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), did not intend to go beyond what he considered a redline—that is, that the center of political power (combining both executive and legislative power) should remain his personal prerogative, closed off from any debate.

The months of April and May showed that repression remained an active strategy to choke off dissenting voices: another protester died in clashes with the police in Sohar in April. Peaceful gatherings and roundabouts were cleared by riot police. Several hundred protesters, journalists, and human rights activists were arrested all over the country.²¹ A creeping militarization was imposed, with a drastic increase in police controls and checkpoints on roads to the UAE. In June and July 2011, more than 100 individuals received jail terms, some for up to five years, on charges such as “possessing material with the intention of making explosives to spread terror,” “illegal gathering,” and “sabotaging and destroying public and private properties.”²²

However, it is worth noting that a number of techniques the government had used in the past to prevent the emergence of alternative discourses were no longer effective.

The repeated labelling of the protesters as scum (*raa*) and vandals (*mukharibin*) by senior officials and national media showed the regime’s inability to accept the legitimacy of those who were expressing alternative opinions without accusing them of breaching the public order. The government also charged that the protesters were under foreign influence, a well-proven method to discredit them and their demands. Following the government’s announcement a few weeks earlier that it had uncovered an Emirati-backed spy network that had targeted the Omani leadership,²³ security forces circulated text messages that fueled rumors of supposed Emirati involvement in the organization of the Sohar protests. These unfounded allegations failed to attract much attention, though.

There were also attempts to buy off individuals thought to be leaders of the protests, by offering them money and positions in government departments—usually without success. Chief executives and human resources departments of private companies based in Batinah were contacted directly by police and Ministry of Manpower officials and instructed to create (sometimes up to 50) jobs overnight for “Sohar roundabout’s young people,” whose names they received from government officials.²⁴

The authorities also turned to tribal leaders for help in restoring the calm. Since the 1970s, Omani authorities have co-opted the tribes and granted their leaders gifts in cash and in kind to ensure their loyalty to the regime. Tribal

sheikhs, many of whom receive monthly salaries as state employees, have acted as intermediaries between the tribes' members and the state apparatus. This was intended to strengthen individuals' tribal belonging and to prevent the emergence of broader political mobilizations.

Interestingly, this manipulation of local identities and tribal issues also proved inefficient in 2011. The Ministry of Interior tried to involve tribal sheikhs and state representatives in provinces (*walis*) to appease the protesters on several occasions and to promise youth jobs in security forces. But this mediation was blatantly turned down by the protesters, a clear sign that, after decades of Qaboos's co-optation policy, the actual level of prestige and authority enjoyed by tribal leaders had declined sharply.

It also appears clear that the authorities lacked an accurate understanding of the protests. Despite all evidence that overthrowing the regime had never been on the protesters' agenda in 2011, security investigations soon used the term opponent (*muarid*).²⁵ This tactic offered the advantage of discrediting the protesters, but the authorities presumably were looking for a rather structured underground organization—far from the actual chaotic coordination among the different sit-ins and the clumsiness of their actions.

The regime took other steps, as well, aimed at tightening legal provisions criminalizing the expression of nonconformist or critical opinions. As early as February 2011, a new cybercrime law issued by sultan's decree imposed jail sentences of up to three years for using the Internet to “produce or publish or distribute or purchase or possess whatsoever that might violate the public ethics” or “prejudice the public order or religious values.” A few weeks later, the prerogatives of the public prosecutor were expanded by sultan's decree, with all the powers held by the inspector general of police and customs assigned to the prosecutor. As a leading Omani financial journalist explained, “the public prosecutor answers directly to the sultan [now] and can investigate anybody.”²⁶

In May 2011, Sultan Qaboos also expanded the powers of the police, allowing them to detain individuals without an arrest warrant for up to fifteen days before bringing them to court—and for up to thirty days without charge “for crimes related to national security or mentioned in the antiterrorism law.”

In October 2011, several articles of the penal law were amended by sultan's decree, imposing jail sentences for “the publication of false news, statements or rumors liable to incite the public or undermine the prestige of the state or weaken trust in its financial state.” A new provision stated that “anyone participating in a gathering of at least 10 persons, with an intent to affect the public system, can be punished with a jail term of one month to one year.” These amendments criminalized the specific character of the protests, even down to the methods they used (for example, roadblocks) and the protesters' appearance (for example, wearing masks or veils in a public place or any other concealment that prevents identification).

The same month, in a bid to exert greater control across the country, an administrative reorganization transformed all regions into governorates, with all governors (except those of Muscat and Dhofar, who have ministerial ranks) acting under the strict supervision of the minister of interior.

Limited Institutional Concessions

Even as the regime moved to crack down on dissent, the sultan made several concessions designed to emphasize his attentiveness to the public's aspirations for greater participation in decisionmaking.

Forty-six percent of eligible people voted in the 2011 Consultative Council election. That turnout, higher than in 2007, was likely a reflection of Omanis' expectations that the council elected that year would advocate for greater reform. The 1,133 candidates competed under their own names, because political parties and platforms are outlawed by the regime. Indeed, except for the fact that candidates had the right to hold public meetings in halls or electoral tents for the first time, the 2011 campaign rules were as restrictive as those that governed elections in 2003 and 2007. Candidates were allowed to put up posters and banners in streets and public places and to advertise on television and in newspapers. But they were not permitted to discuss general topics (like the role of religion in society or the separation of powers) or to present a public campaign together with a candidate from another province, or *wilaya*. Campaigning took place mostly in the meeting rooms (*majlis*) of tribal sheikhs' houses, but also through door-to-door and personal networks.

As with the 2003 and 2007 elections, clientelism, tribal and ethnic affiliations, and money offered by candidates were also key determinants of voters' choices.²⁷ The only significant outcome of these elections was that three men who took part in the protests earlier in the year were elected.

Five days after the vote, the sultan followed through on his March pledge and amended the Basic Law to expand the prerogatives of the Council of Oman. Previously this body could only question ministers who are not involved in national sovereignty (foreign affairs, defense, finance, interior, and oil) and submit amendments in the economic, social, and environmental fields to the Council of Ministers, which is composed of the members of the cabinet and tasked with implementing policies determined by the sultan. The October 2011 amendments allowed the Council of Oman to draft laws on its own initiative. They must be referred for review to the Council of Ministers. In addition, draft laws prepared by the Council of Ministers are to be referred to the Council of Oman for approval or amendment before being submitted to the ruler, who can refer them back to the Council of Oman for reconsideration.

However, these reforms fell far short of widespread expectations that the Council of Oman would be transformed into a true legislative body. In particular, serious restrictions on the Council of Oman's legislative prerogatives still

apply. Laws “which the public interest requires” must be submitted directly to the ruler by the Council of Ministers. And the Council of Oman is only permitted to provide recommendations (which the Council of Ministers is free to ignore) concerning development projects and the state annual budget, which is prepared by a council that the sultan chairs.²⁸

The new amendments gave the Consultative Council the ability to elect its own chairman.²⁹ And while it can still question some ministers, who must send the body an annual report on their activities, the Consultative Council still cannot question ministers involved in national sovereignty. Most importantly, the opinions and decisions of these bodies are not binding on the sultan, who promulgates laws and can dissolve both chambers.³⁰

At the opening session of the Council of Oman on October 31, the sultan made his long-awaited first public address since the start of the protests. But his speech contained no major announcements, beyond a promise to combat unemployment and corruption, disappointing many.

Nonetheless, after the sultan expanded the powers of the Consultative Council, criticism of government policies and the grilling of ministers intensified, reflecting Omanis’ general distrust of cabinet members. Live coverage on the national television channel of these sessions of parliamentary questions (and their extensive redistribution on social media) only increased the national visibility of these elected representatives, whose changed perception of their responsibilities and positions in the general balance of power illustrated a qualitative evolution from that of their predecessors.

Some Consultative Council members were determined to use the popular legitimacy they derived from the ballot box and to take advantage of the sultan’s decision to give the council greater opportunities to express its voice (at least, formally), as seen in a 2012 test of strength between the council and the cabinet.

In November of that year, the Consultative Council officially approved the formation of a defense, security, and foreign relations permanent committee,³¹ covering sovereignty issues that were the cabinet’s undisputed prerogatives. The council renewed its mandate in 2013. But while the initiative was blatantly rejected by the Council of Ministers, the decision was not formally opposed by the ruler. In the post–Arab Spring context, in which cabinet members embodied the widespread perception of an elite busy safeguarding its political and economic privileges, Qaboos was providing a place for the Consultative Council to let off steam. But it was also an unambiguous reminder to cabinet members of their political vulnerability and the fact that their political fate depends on his goodwill.

A decree from the sultan in October 2011 announced the establishment of municipal councils in all eleven governorates (*muhafadhat*), another step that was intended to show Qaboos’s attentiveness to the population’s aspirations for greater participation in decisionmaking. Previously only Muscat governorate had a (fully appointed) municipal council. However, this reform had only

very limited real impact. Composed of members representing *wilayas*, who are elected by universal suffrage for four-year renewable terms, as well as ex officio members representing ministries, the municipal councils are chaired by the head of the governorate, who is appointed by the sultan. They have only advisory powers, and provide opinions and recommendations only on the development of municipal services in the governorate (infrastructure, health, local taxes, and so on).

In December 2012, Oman held its first ever municipal elections. Just over half of the total 447,500 voters included in the country's electronic identity card system voted. At least 50 candidate applications that were submitted by individuals who took part in the 2011 protests were rejected by the election committee "on security grounds."³²

In February 2012, the sultan also restructured the Supreme Judicial Council, which oversees the judiciary; approves nominations to fill positions in the judiciary, the Administrative Court, and the public prosecution; and proposes and reviews draft laws on judicial matters. While the reform increased the Supreme Judicial Council's independence from the minister of justice, it also reasserted the sultan's primacy and control over all these authorities, because the Supreme Judicial Council is chaired by the sultan and any decisions it takes in his absence must be ratified by the monarch.

In another attempt by the regime to show its determination to fight endemic corruption within the state institutions, the prerogatives of the State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution (SFAAI) were expanded by sultan's decree. Its expanded mission includes detecting financial and administrative irregularities, ensuring transparency in financial and administrative transactions, and providing recommendations on how to avoid conflicts of interest.

The end of 2013 and the spring of 2014 were punctuated by a litany of reports announcing prosecutions and convictions of government officials and businessmen on various charges related to abuse of office, money laundering, and corruption.³³ Approximately 40 civil servants and businessmen have been tried in corruption cases since 2013. Among the most prominent people to be prosecuted have been the former secretary general of the Ministry of National Economy, Mohamed al-Khusaibi; Indian businessman P. Mohamed Ali, co-founder of Galfar group, Oman's largest construction company; and the long-serving chief executive of the government-owned Oman Oil, Ahmed al-Wahaibi. Despite all the hopes that rested with the SFAAI and its ambitious mission, though, people involved in these cases have not been among the big economic and political players who had attracted the protesters' wrath and who have embodied the conflict of interest between politics and business since the 1970s.

Continuing Unrest

The combination of political concessions, arbitrary gestures of benevolence, and relentless crackdowns on discordant voices was not enough to reassert the grip of the state and quell the protests. Popular frustration with the slow pace of reform became evident again in May 2012. Around 1,000 oil workers went on strike, demanding better pay and working conditions. At the same time, protests developed again in Sohar in support of Consultative Council member Talib al-Maamari, a forty-year-old Salafi professor of Arabic literature at Sohar University who faced calls from the public prosecutor that his parliamentary immunity be lifted, following postings on his Facebook page that were critical of senior officials at the Ministry of Housing. Such political activism, and especially his role as a champion for victims of Sohar's industrial area pollution, was crucial in his 2011 election to the Consultative Council.

In early June 2012, the public prosecutor, whose brother was appointed head of the internal security service with the rank of minister by royal decree in May 2013, threatened to take "all appropriate legal actions" against writers, bloggers, and sit-in participants who acted "against values and morals of the Omani society" and to "prejudice the national security and public interests." A new crackdown on civil society followed in the summer of 2012, leading to jail terms (from six to eighteen months) for more than 40 individuals on various charges related to "illegal gathering," "violation of information crimes law," and "defamation of the sultan." Clashes between riot police and local youth around Sohar were so common in 2012 and 2013 that curfews were imposed and armored vehicles deployed in various areas.

In July 2013, the sultan tried to close the delicate chapter of social and political contestation that had been opened two years before—and that authorities wanted to consider only an unfortunate parenthesis. On the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of his accession to the throne, Qaboos pardoned and ordered the release of all the individuals who had been sentenced and imprisoned for political reasons. The sultan also ordered that those dismissed from private and public jobs after the 2011–2012 protests be reinstated.

Yet the intimidation and arbitrary detention of activists have continued and, according to Human Rights Watch, basic rights have been "routinely trampled" since then.³⁴ Human rights activist Said Jaddad was arrested again a few days after the sultan's pardon, facing charges of "undermining the status and prestige of the state," following his calls for political and social reforms, and contact with foreign human rights bodies. The same month, renewed demonstrations and blockades of Sohar's industrial area led to a new crackdown by riot police and more arrests.

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In May and July 2014, four businessmen and civil servants from Sohar and Buraimi, near the UAE border, and two bloggers were arrested and held in a secret location. The top editor of the independent online magazine *Muwatin*, Mohamed al-Fazari, who had been released after the sultan's pardon in March 2013, was again arrested without a warrant or specific charges in September 2014.³⁵ This happened one month later to writer and poet Said al-Darudi, following a critical Facebook post,³⁶ and to two other bloggers in November. All of them were released after being held for weeks of detention incommunicado and without charges. In December, the campaign of intimidation carried out by Omani security once again targeted human rights defender Said Jaddad and social media activist Hilal al-Busaidi, who had been sentenced in 2012 to one year in jail on charges of *lèse-majesté*. In addition, writer Ali al-Rawahi was summoned and detained incommunicado for five days after tweeting that Oman had become “a family company managed by thieves and of which the people are the clients ignoring their rights and how to claim them.”³⁷ In January 2015, Said Jaddad was arrested again and summoned to court to face fabricated charges of “undermining the prestige of the state.”

Consultative Council member Talib al-Maamari was sentenced in October 2014, after more than a year of detention, to three years in jail on charges of illegal gathering and undermining the status and prestige of the state.³⁸ This harsh sentence imposed on someone considered a “real political leader” in North Batinah appears to be an unequivocal message to members of the Consultative Council that the semifreedom of expression tolerated by the regime after 2011 was no longer permitted,³⁹ and that the existence of a proper parliament in Oman, with actual legislative powers, is definitely not on the agenda.

That message appears to have been received. While the grilling of ministers had become more virulent following the 2011 elections, it has dramatically decreased since Talib al-Maamari's arrest in August 2013. And, despite evidence of serious financial and administrative irregularities at the Ministry of Higher Education provided by local newspapers as early as December 2013,⁴⁰ it was not until a year later that the Consultative Council requested that the minister appear for questioning. At the same time, one of the most obvious illustrations of the Consultative Council's timid emancipation that had taken place after 2011, the defense, security, and foreign relations permanent committee, has been virtually dormant since 2013.

Labor protests also continued. In October 2013, teachers from government-run schools throughout the country held a four-week strike, the longest and largest on record. At the height of the strike, 35,000 teachers—demanding a salary structure based on seniority and the ability to form an elected union⁴¹—were participating and 740 out of 1,047 public schools were shut down.⁴² A few days later, in reaction to strikes that have affected key economic sectors of the country since 2012, the minister of manpower issued a new resolution prohibiting strikes—or the instigation of them—at establishments that

provide “essential public services,” that is, oil facilities and refineries, ports, and airports.⁴³ However, other strikes in prominent private companies, including in the petrochemicals and retail sectors, took place in spring 2014.⁴⁴

A new Nationality Law (promulgated by sultan’s decree in August 2014) gave the state the power to strip Omani nationals of their citizenship if they “engage in a group, a party or an organization that adopts principles or doctrines that can harm the interests of Oman” or “worked for a foreign country in any way whatsoever . . . and failed to fulfil the Omani government’s order to abandon such a work within a specified time.”⁴⁵ These provisions can obviously be used to threaten or quell peaceful dissent.

On the social and economic side, as a journalist explained, the regime “has been striving by all proper means to prevent a new social conflagration.”⁴⁶ While the number of scholarships to study abroad has exploded, the Council of Ministers announced in February 2013 a 62 percent increase in the minimum gross salary for nationals working in the private sector, which took effect in July 2013.⁴⁷ Moreover, royal orders were issued in November 2013 to standardize all grades, salaries, and pension benefits for employees in the public sector—all with effect from January 1, 2014. Furthermore, to encourage the hiring of more Omani nationals, the Ministry of Manpower decided to stop issuing visas to non-Omani workers employed in construction and cleaning sectors for a period of six months effective from November 1, 2013.⁴⁸

A study by the Omani government projected that the public sector wage bill in 2014 would jump by as much as \$2.3 billion, reflecting a 39 percent increase in salaries paid from the state budget. That follows a 70 percent increase in government spending between 2011 and 2014.⁴⁹

In late 2014 and early 2015, falling oil prices became a new source of pressure. The price that the country needs in order to balance its budget was expected to nearly double to \$97 per barrel in 2014 from \$54 on average in 2006–2010, the International Monetary Fund said in November 2013.⁵⁰ While 2014 budget plans assumed an average oil price of \$85 per barrel, the level expected in the 2015 budget is \$75 per barrel. In these conditions, the 2015 budget anticipates a deficit of \$6.5 billion, or about 8 percent of the country’s GDP—the country’s biggest fiscal deficit since 1990.⁵¹

Under increasing pressure to expand nonoil revenues and find other ways to balance the budget, the cabinet has been considering cutting state subsidies in several areas in 2015, including energy. Consultative Council members reacted negatively to such a move and suggested instead imposing a 2 percent tax on expatriates’ remittances back to their home countries and reducing the defense budget.⁵²

The Regional Context

While working to combat unprecedented domestic opposition, the regime moved throughout this period to shore up its support in the region, where protests were also flaring.

Oman has always perceived political instability in the Middle East as a factor threatening its own internal stability. This perception of political vulnerability helps explain the sultanate's determination to prevent regional actors from interfering in its internal affairs. The inescapable corollary of (and price for) that desire for regional independence has been Oman's unquestioned political and military dependence on Britain and the United States.

Although British forces officially left Omani bases in 1977, at the end of the Dhofar war, these positions were the only ones on the Arabian Peninsula

Oman's relations with its neighbors have been governed by the determination to prevent the convulsions of the region from impacting its internal political status quo.

used in 1991, and again in 2003, as operational bases by the British-U.S. coalition during the air offensives against Iraq. The renewal of military cooperation agreements with both Britain and the United States in 1985 and 1995, as well as joint exercises—including a 2001 exercise in the Omani desert, the biggest deployment of British troops abroad since the 1980s—only confirmed this Omani strategic dependence. Even if it causes recurrent criticism or frustration in other GCC countries and inside Oman, this partnership—

and the military and political protection it provides—is the key that has granted the Omani ruler latitude of action within the GCC and at home.

In that environment, Oman's relations with its neighbors have been governed by the determination to prevent the convulsions of the region from impacting its internal political status quo. In January 2009, Oman announced that it would not join the GCC monetary union. Given the gap in living standards and wages between Oman and its wealthier GCC neighbors, a monetary union would have had dramatic effects on the Omani economy. This position had no substantial damaging effects on Oman's relationship with its neighbors, however, as shown by both the GCC's decision to set up a \$10 billion aid package to help Oman cope with protests in March 2011 and Oman's concomitant support for the Saudis' and Emiratis' decision to send troops to Bahrain.

Since the short-term emergency that struck all Gulf monarchies in 2011, the desire to quell internal pro-democracy movements has taken precedence over divergences related to long-term GCC-Iran relations or intra-GCC economic cooperation. For example, in preparation for the 34th GCC summit in December 2013, the minister responsible for foreign affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi, declared that Oman would not prevent the upgrading of the GCC into a union of six countries, but would “not be part of it” if it happened. That stance had no impact on Oman's adherence to GCC security imperatives. In January 2014, Sultan Qaboos ratified the GCC security pact that had been signed

in November 2012, which strengthens cooperation and mutual assistance in security matters. It also allows the hunting down of those who are outside the law, or who are wanted by party states, regardless of their nationalities, and the integration of signatories' security apparatuses to provide support to each other during times of security disturbances and unrest. And Oman and Kuwait have already signed several economic deals, including one worth \$1.75 billion in November 2014, as part of the \$10 billion GCC financial aid pledged in 2011.

Significant investments in the security sector have been a priority in Oman since 2011.

Defense and national security forces consumed 36.5 percent of the state's expenditure in 2012, and 11.7 percent of the country's GDP in 2013⁵³—one of the world's highest rates. Oman registered a 51 percent increase in defense spending in 2012—the sharpest worldwide.⁵⁴

The Need to Open a New Chapter

The Omani Spring protests that began in 2011, and the regime's response to them, have revealed how the extreme personalization of Oman's political system since 1970 has reached its limits. That system was for decades the best antidote to the emergence of alternative discourses to Sultan Qaboos. But, for several years, young generations have not hesitated to question the Renaissance ideology. As a civil servant who graduated from Kuwait University explained in 2004: "For us, 1970 is dust now, it is history. What matters for us is what happens now."

The Arab Spring served to sharpen this tension. The official narrative stressing Omanis' duty of loyalty toward the "father of the nation" seems inaudible in a country where 84 percent of the population was born after 1970 and 70 percent after 1980. It is openly challenged by activists and bloggers who now make a clear distinction between the current regime and the Omani nation. Their criticism of the ruler's political decisions and power practices are explicitly made in the name of Oman and their concerns for the future of the country. And, with the sultan's absence and ill health, and continuing questions about the succession process, anxiety about that future is increasing.

Direct criticism of the sultan progressively became more common in the protests. In Salalah, demonstrators openly questioned the ruler's responsibility in economic mismanagement ("If you didn't know [the malpractices], it is a disaster; but if you did know, it is an even bigger disaster.") or threatened him in veiled terms, by referring to the Dhofar war and to the political fate of his father, who was forced out of power ("The one who forgets the 1970s should think of the grandchildren of the free men."). Online writers and protesters who openly criticized the ruler's practices—namely his proximity to British and U.S. interests, and his management of the oil rent and the country, which they likened to that of a private firm—were quickly arrested and condemned

to jail for *lèse-majesté*. Activists who were convinced of the ruler's belief in reform before the Arab Spring later expressed their "huge disillusionment" with the regime's response to the society's call for help. One of the leaders of the 2011 Muscat protests put it bluntly:

In 2011, we wanted to understand what the causes of our country's disease are. We wanted to remove the corrupted elite [around the sultan] from the political system and see if this could sort out the problem. We managed to make these elites go . . . but we have quickly understood that the body was still deeply infected.⁵⁵

The ruler, who in 2011 fired high-profile ministers who had long served as political fodder, has no one left to blame, and no one who can be dismissed in order to calm discontent. As one Internet activist from the interior explained:

People's faith in Sultan Qaboos is still high, however, there is no one else anymore to blame for the failure of the reforms. That's why I think that if he will appoint a prime minister he will be "Sponge Bob," just someone who will suck all the dissatisfaction which may be directed toward the sultan otherwise.⁵⁶

The changed status of the sultan was evident in November 2012, when, on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, he visited Musandam, along the Strait of Hormuz, and Sohar—his first visit to the town since the beginning of the 2011 protests. The obvious intention of the trip was to suggest that the general situation was back to normal. But the situation on the ground showed just how much had changed. The visit was heavily choreographed, with a huge deployment of security forces that placed the town under siege, and preemptive questioning of young people, who were accused of making fun of the visit with Internet postings that quickly spread on social networks. Even more, graffiti calling for the overthrow of the sultan appeared on Sohar walls. The retired senior civil servant, who insisted that he "loves His Majesty" and "will be loyal and indebted [to him] all [his] life," explained that he was

not afraid of activists but rather of young poor population who has nothing to lose and whose anger can be destructive. . . . Ordinary people don't believe [the sultan] can change anything to the situation. He is perceived as far and disconnected from real issues. The old man is alone, terribly alone, he has very few friends or people he trusts.⁵⁷

As one of the Sohar activists summarized, "Qaboos has become somebody like anybody else, he can make mistakes like anybody else."⁵⁸ This dramatic change in the relationship between Omani society and its leadership is the most blatant symptom of the unprecedented challenges to the old authoritarian rentier model of development that confront the regime.

With that, and the sultan's prolonged absence, the nomination of a crown prince or a prime minister appears to be a political priority. Many Omanis have eagerly awaited such an announcement, which would lay the foundation for governance of a post-Qaboos Oman. But the regime has remained reluctant to

break the taboo on key issues, including the appointment of a prime minister and the country's future governance, fueling widespread anxiety.

Unlike in other GCC monarchies, Sultan Qaboos has largely excluded his extended family from office. At the end of 2014, the sultan had no children and had not publicly designated an heir.

Under a succession process that was established in 1996, only Muslim male descendants of Qaboos's great-great-grandfather, Sultan Turki, who are legitimate sons of Omani Muslim parents, are eligible to become sultan. When the throne is vacant, the Ruling Family Council is required to meet within three days to designate a successor. If the family council fails to choose someone, it falls to the Defense Council—together, since a symbolic amendment in 2011, with the chairmen of the Consultative Council and the State Council, along with three Supreme Court members—to confirm the person that the former ruler designated beforehand in a letter addressed to the Ruling Family Council. In 1997, Sultan Qaboos announced that he had “already written down two names, in descending order, and put them in sealed envelopes in two different regions.”⁵⁹

There has been no shortage of speculation in Muscat for the last twenty years about the names that might be on the list. The highest ranking person in official protocol, Fahd bin Mahmoud, deputy prime minister for the Council of Ministers, whose children's mother is of French origin, appears unable to claim the throne because he cannot plan to pass the kingship to one of them after his death. The more probable candidates are thus the three sons of Qaboos's paternal uncle and former prime minister Tariq bin Taimur. Former brigadier general Asad bin Tariq, a graduate of Sandhurst, the British military academy, who briefly held command of the sultan's armored corps in the 1990s, has been the personal representative of the sultan since 2002. His half-brother Haitham served as undersecretary, then secretary general, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and became minister of national heritage and culture—the position he currently holds. Moreover, in December 2013, a sultan's order appointed Haitham chair of the main committee responsible for developing and drafting a new long-term national strategy entitled *Oman Vision 2040*.⁶⁰ Former rear admiral Shihab, a full brother of Haitham, was appointed in 1990 as commander of the Royal Navy, and has served as adviser to the sultan since 2004. Asad is said to enjoy support among the military while intelligence services and the ruler's palace office would privilege Haitham.⁶¹

Speaking in July 2013, the minister responsible for foreign affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi, said the succession process will not lead to a power vacuum in the country, but added that the process of appointing a prime minister to support Sultan Qaboos in the meantime was a “complex issue.”⁶²

Conclusion

The identification of contemporary Oman as a whole with Qaboos, which has been the keystone of the regime's strategy of legitimacy for decades, is now openly challenged by activists and bloggers, who make a clear distinction between the current regime and the Omani nation. The consequences for the ruler himself are massive, as explained by a university teacher:

I am afraid [the sultan] may squander all he has built and the popular recognition he has accumulated for forty years. I am supporting the nomination of a prime minister or a crown prince as soon as possible, in order for Qaboos to keep his image of "Son of God on Earth" that he has built for himself.⁶³

The complexity of the succession mechanism established in the Basic Law, combined with the central role played by officials who do not belong to the royal family, raises many questions. There is every indication that the Ruling Family Council has never met to date. In these circumstances, if the royal family cannot make a decision, is it ready to yield supreme decisionmaking to individuals who do not belong to the royal family and who owe their positions solely to Qaboos?

Moreover, in spite of the precautions taken by the ruler, there appears to be a risk that contradictory messages will emerge, creating political confusion. In Qaboos's absence, there does not seem to be any patriarchal figure in the Al Said family who could oversee the succession process and ensure that disagreements remain contained.

The triptych that has defined contemporary Oman—the post-1970 Renaissance ideology, the state apparatus, and its supreme figure, Sultan Qaboos—cannot be touched without putting into question the entire nation-building project that he undertook. This model of legitimacy, based on the extreme personalization of the political system, is intimately linked to the person of Qaboos and to him only.

Tremendous social and economic challenges await Qaboos's successor. But Oman's young civil society will not be willing to grant him the same degree of authoritarian paternalism that their parents gave Qaboos. The use of the oil rent as an emergency job and subsidy faucet; the firing of dignitaries as scapegoats who were made responsible for the system's failings; and the ruler's arbitrary gestures of goodwill, a way to enhance his legitimacy and publicly reaffirm his centrality to the maintenance of national unity—all of these tools have proved to be partially unsuccessful since 2011.

The regime's repressive measures after 2012 resulted again in what the United Nations special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association called in September 2014 a "pervasive culture of silence and fear affecting anyone who wants to speak and work for reforms in Oman."⁶⁴ That response only confirms the authorities' disarray in the face of a development they

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can no longer stop: the flourishing criticism of the elite's political management of this critical juncture in Oman's history. These grievances are made explicitly in the name of Oman and out of concern for the future of the country.

There is no doubt that the ruler's short television address from Germany in November 2014 provided a feeling of temporary relief to many, who are well aware of the considerable turmoil his sudden demise may provoke. However, the dramatic change in the relationship between the society and its leadership confronts the Qaboos State with unprecedented questions whose answers can no longer be delayed.

Notes

- 1 Ali Ahmed al-Riyami, “90-m Long Message of Gratitude for 41st Renaissance Day,” *Oman Observer*, July 21, 2011.
- 2 Simeon Kerr, “Protests Awaken Sleepy Sultanate of Oman,” *Financial Times*, February 28, 2011.
- 3 Dhofar Province, the southern province of Oman, was the theater in 1962 of an uprising of tribes against the authority of Sultan Said. Gradually, this movement morphed into the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf. In July 1970, when the uprising was about to spread to northern Oman, the British orchestrated Sultan Said’s overthrow by his son Qaboos. This decision enjoyed the support of the other Gulf rulers and the shah of Iran, all worried by potential revolutionary contagion. The new sovereign, backed by Britain, Jordan, and Iran, proclaimed the end of the war in 1975.
- 4 Said al-Hashimi, *Al-Rabi al-Umani. Qaraa fi al-Siyaaat wa-l-Dalalat* (The Omani Spring: A reading of its context and implications) (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2013).
- 5 Personal interview, Muscat, November 14, 2012.
- 6 Quoted in an interview in *Le Monde*, May 22, 1973.
- 7 Judith Miller, “Creating Modern Oman: An Interview With Sultan Qabus,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 3 (1997): 17.
- 8 Sultanate of Oman, *Oman Statistical Yearbook 2014* (Muscat: National Center for Statistics and Information, 2014), table 9-2.
- 9 Sultanate of Oman, *Oman Statistical Yearbook 2014* (Muscat: National Center for Statistics and Information, 2014), tables 6-14 and 2-15.
- 10 Maqbool al-Sultan, then Minister of Commerce and Industry, quoted in *Times of Oman*, August 17, 2004.
- 11 1 Omani rial = \$2.60.
- 12 Sultanate of Oman, *Monthly Statistical Bulletin March 2011* (Muscat: National Center for Statistics and Information, 2011).
- 13 For more details, see Marc Valeri, *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chapter 6.
- 14 Estimates of religious allegiance are not based on official data because Omani authorities never mention figures for religious, tribal, or ethnic groups. According to calculations based on the national census, Ibadis appear to constitute 50–55 percent of the population, Sunnis 45–50 percent, and Shia 3–4 percent. Ibadis are in strong majority in Inner Oman, the site of the historical centers of the imamate.
- 15 “Fi Bid’ al-Muhakama Dafa Mutahamun Bi-Ann Himayat al-Madhhab al-Ibadi Ahad Ahdafahum” (At the beginning of the trial, defenders declared that protection of the Ibadi doctrine is one of their goals), *al-Hayat*, April 19, 2005.
- 16 Dale F. Eickelman, “From Theocracy to Monarchy: Authority and Legitimacy in Inner Oman, 1935–1957,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 1 (1985): 18.

- 17 This was reversed by the UAE government after 2003, out of concern that such a presence could have adverse effects if UAE-Oman political tensions arose.
- 18 Personal interview, Muscat, November 11, 2012.
- 19 In July 2014, it was estimated that 200 Omanis had joined Sunni military groups in Syria. See Turki al-Balushi, "Umaniyun Yuqatilun fi Suria" (Omani fighting in Syria), *al-Balad*, July 20, 2014, <http://albaladoman.com/?p=20361>.
- 20 Personal interview, Muscat, October 10, 2011.
- 21 The systematic practice of physical and psychological mistreatment, which in many cases amounted to torture, was reported (such as politically motivated disappearances, virginity tests, forced confessions, solitary confinement, and incommunicado detention in 4-square-meter cells without windows with loud music and full light for twenty-four hours in unknown locations, sleep deprivation, extreme temperatures, and restricted access to toilets). See, for instance, the U.S. Department of State Country Reports for Oman on Human Rights Practices 2012, 1.usa.gov/URP0Gp, and 2013, 1.usa.gov/1s8ym3S; Gulf Center for Human Rights, "Torture in Oman," January 29, 2014, <http://gc4hr.org/report/view/20>. Such practices continue today. See "Oman: Rights Routinely Trampled," Human Rights Watch, December 19, 2014.
- 22 "Sohar Protesters Given Five-Year Jail Term," *Gulf News*, June 28, 2011; "Court Jails 12 in Sohar Terrorism Case," *Gulf News*, July 7, 2011. These sentences were upheld by Oman's Supreme Court in April 2012.
- 23 "Official Security Source—Spy Network Unveils," Oman News Agency, January 30, 2011.
- 24 Personal interview, Sohar, November 12, 2012.
- 25 Personal interviews, October 2011 and November 2012.
- 26 Quoted in Hugh Eakin, "In the Heart of Mysterious Oman," *New York Review of Books* 61, no. 13, August 14, 2014, 59.
- 27 The campaign coincided with the trial of the editor in chief and a reporter of the independent newspaper *al-Zaman* for publishing an article providing evidence of corruption in the Ministry of Justice. They were sentenced to jail for five months for insulting the minister of justice and his undersecretary and a one-month closure of the newspaper was ordered.
- 28 This council is the Financial Affairs and Energy Resources Council. It is composed of cabinet members, the deputy chairman of the central bank, and advisers to the sultan.
- 29 On October 29, 2011, Khalid al-Maawali was elected chairman of the council. A former director general for investment of the Ministry of Tourism (2005–2008), Khalid al-Maawali was a member of the United States–Oman free trade agreement negotiation team. An active businessman, he has been member of the board of a number of companies listed on the Muscat Securities Market. While al-Maawali is usually presented as embodying the renewal of the Omani political class since 2011, his family has long been deeply entrenched in the circles of power. His brother Nasir has chaired the SFAAI (with a rank of minister) since 2011, and his cousin Hilal al-Maawali was the inspector general of police and customs and the minister of civil service.
- 30 In addition, the ruler can issue decrees that have the same power of law between the terms of the Council of Oman and during the adjourned period of the Consultative Council and the holding of the State Council sessions.
- 31 "Majlis A'Shura Discusses Economic and Financial Committee Report," Oman News Agency, November 26, 2012.
- 32 "50 Candidates Rejected," *Gulf News*, December 21, 2012.
- 33 "Omani CEO Jailed for 23 Years in Graft Case: Court," Reuters, February 27, 2014; "Ahkam wa qadaya jadida fi muhakamat al-fasad" (New verdicts and cases in corruption trials), *al-Zaman*, March 3, 2014.
- 34 Human Rights Watch, "Oman: Rights Routinely Trampled."

- 35 “Update: Oman—Human Rights Defender Mr Mohamed Al Fazari Released,” Frontline Defenders, September 9, 2014.
- 36 Said bin Abdullah al-Darudi, “Ana Lastu Umaniyyan ... Ana Dhufari” (I am not Omani ... I am Dhofari), October 7, 2014, www.facebook.com/asadaroodi/posts/1540658982831796.
- 37 “Al-sultat tufrij an al-katib Ali al-Rawahi bad ayyam min al-tahqiq” (Authorities Free writer Ali al-Rawahi after days of interrogations), *al-Balad*, January 2, 2015.
- 38 “Idana Udu Majlis al-Shura Talib al-Maamari Bi 3 Sanawat Sijn” (Consultative Council member Taib al-Maamari sentenced to three years in jail), *al-Balad*, October 30, 2014, <http://albaladoman.com/?p=22898>. A Municipal Council elected member was also sentenced to jail.
- 39 Interview, November 13, 2012.
- 40 “Malaffat jadida fi tajawzat al-talim al-ali” (New files in higher education infringements), *al-Zaman*, December 8, 2013; “Tajawzat al-talim al-ali 2 ... Masrufat dakhma natija mukhalafat fi lajna al-bathat” (Higher education infringements 2 ... huge expenses following irregularities in the Scholarship Commission), *al-Zaman*, December 17, 2013; “Tajawzat al-talim al-ali 3 ... Athrat fi al-khutat al-khamsia” (Higher education infringements 3 ... issues in five-year plans), *al-Zaman*, January 12, 2014.
- 41 The law prohibits members of the armed forces, other public security institutions, government employees, and domestic workers from forming or joining unions.
- 42 “Hundreds of Schools Participate in Oman Strike,” *Gulf News*, October 1, 2013.
- 43 “Oman Bans Strikes at Facilities Providing Essential Services,” *Muscat Daily*, November 11, 2013.
- 44 “Lack of Coordination Blamed for Octal Strike,” *Gulf News*, March 9, 2014.
- 45 The full text (in Arabic) of the law is available of the Ministry of Legal Affairs website: <http://mola.gov.om/royals.aspx?Gzy=14>.
- 46 Personal interview, Muscat, November 13, 2012.
- 47 It now consists of 225 Omani rials as a basic salary plus 100 Omani rials as transport and housing allowance.
- 48 Exceptions to the policy were made for international companies, companies working on government projects, and firms managed full-time by their owners. This suspension was later extended for another six months but lifted in October 2014 under increasing private sector pressure.
- 49 Crystal A. Ennis and Ra’id Z. al-Jamali, “Elusive Employment: Development Planning and Labor Market Trends in Oman,” Chatham House, September 2014, 14.
- 50 “Oman’s Public Wage Bill Could Jump \$2.3 Billion in 2014—Finance Minister,” Reuters, November 13, 2013.
- 51 “Oman 2015 Budget Raises State Spending at Expense of Big Deficit,” Reuters, January 1, 2015.
- 52 “Amid Low Oil Prices, Oman Considers Remittance Tax on Expats,” *Gulf News*, November 25, 2014.
- 53 Stockholm Institute for Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “Military Expenditure Database,” www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database.
- 54 SIPRI, “Trends in World Military Expenditure 2012,” April 2013, http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=458.
- 55 Personal interview, Muscat, October 11, 2011.
- 56 Personal electronic communication, June 16, 2012.
- 57 Personal interview, Muscat, November 14, 2012.
- 58 Personal interview, Muscat, October 12, 2011.
- 59 Judith Miller, “Creating Modern Oman: An Interview With Sultan Qaboos,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 3 (1997): 17.
- 60 This is to replace the old Oman Vision 2020 drafted in 1995, the objectives of which had already proved unreachable in the mid-2000s and which became obsolete with the Omani Spring.

- 61 All of them have been very active businessmen as well. Asad runs several companies, including Asad Investment Company, operating as his personal investment vehicle and said to control more than \$1 billion in assets worldwide. His son Taimur, who is married to the daughter of Qaboos's maternal uncle, is considered to be the leading candidate in his generation for the succession. Taimur has been chairman of Alizz Bank, Oman's second Islamic bank, since 2012. Haitham is chairman and the main shareholder of National Trading, which has been involved in the construction of two major power plants and is agent in Oman for several multinational companies. Haitham was also involved in the Blue City project, a new tourism-devoted city south of Sohar initially worth \$20 billion that was supposed to accommodate 200,000 residents in 2020. Shihab has a number of business interests as well through the group of companies he owns and chairs, Seven Seas.
- 62 "Oman: Naming Prime Minister Is Not Easy, Says Minister," *Gulf News*, July 25, 2013.
- 63 Personal interview with a university teacher, Muscat, October 16, 2011.
- 64 "United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association at the Conclusion of His Visit to the Sultanate of Oman," September 13, 2014, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15028&LangID=E.

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