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## *The Diplomatic Sultan.*

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*On Friday 10 January 2020, Arab long-lived Middle East's leader, died at 79 after a long fight against cancer. Considered as a modern ruler, he was called "The father of Oman", for his ability to negotiate and shape a new central role for his country. His successor, Haitham bin Tariq, has now the difficult task to maintain the equilibrium that featured Qaboos bin Said.*

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Di

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### ***The Father of Oman***

For 50 years, Qaboos was the absolute protagonist of the Omani politics. Considered as an enlightened ruler, he was *de facto* an absolute monarch, as the voices silenced during the Arab Spring have showed<sup>1</sup>. Born in 1940, the former Sultan attended the Royal Academy of Standhurst, in the United Kingdom. Returned to Oman, at the age of 29, he was the protagonist of a non-violent coup d'état supported by the British in 1970 that dethroned his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur, an ultra-conservative leader. From that time, Oman has been an

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<sup>1</sup> NICOLL F., *Oman: Sultan Qaboos still popular despite discontent*, *BBC News*, 3 March 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12639699>

atypical country in the Gulf area: its main characteristics were the modernization and the neutrality.

One of his main goal was to unify his people, composed by ca. 5 million people, which 43% are expats<sup>2</sup>, through Ibadism. This one is the “liberal line” of Islam, followed mainly by Omanis and Lybians, which pursue the tolerance and accommodation, and respect of other religions. Ibadī Islam has allowed Oman to follow a different course from its neighbours, resisting pressures from the Saudis, followers of Whabbism<sup>3</sup>, to contrast their enemies, as Iran and Qatar<sup>4</sup>.

Regarding foreign policy, two recent episodes could easily demonstrate the forward-thinking of the late Oman’s ruler: his role in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2013 and in the Gulf crisis of 2017. The first one showed the great skills of mediation of Qaboos: although the Iran Nuclear Deal was set up in 2015, Qaboos’ efforts to negotiate between the counterparts started earlier and many steps were taken before its signature, one of them was surely the historical meeting between Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry held in Muscat, the capital of Oman, in November 2014<sup>5</sup>.

The second one presented his abilities in diplomacy: despite the tension in the Gulf was really high, especially between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Oman was the only country in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which did not stand against Qatar and tried to “*play this role of being in the middle, helping to maintain the status quo. It doesn't welcome any sudden change, because it has hoped to maintain the geopolitics of the region as it is, without any turbulence*”, as stated by Mahjoob Zweiri, professor at Qatar University<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51082415>

<sup>3</sup> Initiated in the 18th century, it is the most conservative Muslim group

<sup>4</sup><https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/12/18/who-are-the-ibadis>

<sup>5</sup> TRAN E., *The Rise and Fall of the JCPOA: Oman’s Foreign Policy, Part 3*, International Review, 5 July 2019, <https://international-review.org/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-jcpoa-omans-foreign-policy-part-3/>

<sup>6</sup> O’Toole M., *What is Oman's stance on the Qatar-Gulf crisis?*, Aljazeera, 1 December 2017, in <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/oman-stance-qatar-gulf-crisis-171125061013462.html>

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As the love of the people has shown, Qaboos succeeded also on the internal side. Through oil reserves, he was able to provide his country excellent infrastructures and facilities: he built roads, ports, schools and hospitals, leading to modernisation an undeveloped country. In addition, he promoted compulsory education both for men and women, he developed the healthcare system<sup>7</sup>.

### ***The future challenges of Haitham bin Tariq***

Due to the fact that Qaboos had no sons or direct heirs, there were many speculations on who would succeed to the “Father of Oman”. On the contrary, few hours after Qaboos’ death, the Omani Council elected his 65 years old cousin, Haitham bin Tariq, as new ruler. Described as “quiet character”, an “anglophile” and a “tried administrator”, the former Minister of Heritage and Culture was chosen by Qaboos for his similarities with him.

Similarities that were confirmed during his inaugural speech where he said that he would continue the “peaceful coexistence and non-interference” policy typical of his predecessor. The new Sultan is in the middle of a complex historical context, especially after the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani<sup>8</sup>. However, on the foreign side, the situation is calmer than it appears. Indeed, many countries of the region, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, had several advantages from the Omani third-party role, and they would probably continue keeping it that way<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> PERTEGHELLA A., *Oman, morto il sultano Qaboos bin Said: quali scenari?*, ISPI WATCH, 11 January 2020 in <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/oman-morto-il-sultano-qaboos-bin-said-quali-scenari-24801>

<sup>8</sup> For further information on Soleimani, see NOCERINO D., *Qasem Soleimani: “L’agente più potente del Medio Oriente”*, Opinio Juris-Law and Politics Review, 9 January 2020, in <http://www.opiniojuris.it/qasem-soleimani-medio-orient/>

<sup>9</sup> PERTEGHELLA A., *Oman, morto il sultano Qaboos bin Said: quali scenari?*, ISPI WATCH, 11 January 2020, in <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/oman-morto-il-sultano-qaboos-bin-said-quali-scenari-24801>

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But above all, the real challenge of Tariq will be on the internal side: the economic and social frame is really complicated, due to the fall of oil price which will create a deficit of 6.4 billion \$ only in 2020. For this reason, the country has been developing the ambitious plan “Oman 2040”. As the other countries of the Gulf area<sup>10</sup>, Oman has initiated its own “Vision” already in the mid Nineties in order to transform its economy and reduce its dependence from oil and hydrocarbons, planning to make great investments in sectors as agriculture, industry, fishery, tourism and especially logistic infrastructures. The latter will be implemented mainly thanks the alliance with China: Oman was the first Arab country to ask for a 265 million loan to the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) and it will be at the centre of the Belt and Road Initiative, specifically for the crucial role that Chinese will have in the Duqm area<sup>11</sup>.

The MENA Region and the entire world have benefited from the vision of Qaboos, who was crucial despite his (small) political power. The Omani model has always been a source of balance in a various and complicated environment. Sultan Tariq has the duty to speak with the outside world with the same wisdom of his predecessor, and in the meantime find the right solution to internal problems.

Omani diplomacy is needed now more than ever.

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<sup>10</sup> For further information on the strategies of Gulf countries, see SCIPIONE J., *Il Golfo e la diversificazione economica*, Geopolitica.info, 15 July 2018, in <https://www.geopolitica.info/il-golfo-e-la-diversificazione-economica/>

<sup>11</sup> PERTEGHELLA A., *Cina-Oman: A Duqm una partita non solo BRI*, ISPI WATCH, 28 November 2019, in <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/cina-oman-duqm-una-partita-non-solo-bri-24520>