



PolicyWatch 2333

# Oman Ruler's Failing Health Could Affect U.S. Iran Policy

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The death of Sultan Qaboos with no clear successor would jeopardize U.S.-Iran diplomatic contacts, the latest of which will be the meeting tomorrow in Muscat between Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

On November 5, the Omani state television channel broadcast a video of seventy-three-year-old Sultan Qaboos bin Said, currently undergoing medical treatment in Germany. He greeted Omanis in anticipation of their national day, November 18, and expressed regret that he would not be back in Oman for the celebrations. No information has been given on what is wrong with the ruler but, though his voice was strong, he looked emaciated and frail. An unnamed diplomat in Muscat, the Omani capital, had been quoted in August as saying Qaboos has colon cancer.

Although the video message was reported as "reassuring" Omanis of their ruler's health, and the 2.2 million Omanis along with the country's estimated 600,000 expatriate workers were said to have "rejoiced" at seeing Qaboos, the more likely immediate impact will be an open leadership succession struggle and domestic political uncertainty in this strategic state with probably the best relations with Iran of any Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member.

Unlike the rulers of the other GCC states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates), Qaboos has no sons (and no daughters), nor brothers or half brothers. A modernist who is credited with the extraordinary development of his country since he overthrew his reclusive father, with British assistance, in 1970, his personality dominates the country -- the national day is his birthday -- and he controls all the reins of power. Apart from being the ruler, in name he is also the prime minister, defense minister, finance minister, foreign minister, as well as governor of the central bank. Although he would have personally approved allowing Oman to become the back channel for Washington's diplomatic outreach to Iran in 2012, in practice he delegates many day-to-day decisions. Indeed, Yusuf bin Alawi, a familiar face of Oman in international affairs, is the de facto foreign minister.

Both geographically and politically, Oman is a GCC outlier. Most of its territory lies to the east of the Strait of Hormuz, the opening to the Persian Gulf. It shares a couple of offshore natural gas fields with Iran, for which joint exploitation was agreed when Iranian president Hassan Rouhani visited Muscat in March, and its principal foreign-exchange earner is the gas it exports in the form of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to customers in Asia. Oman has small oil reserves compared with neighboring Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but China is a major customer. About three-quarters of Omanis, including Sultan Qaboos, are from the small Ibadi sect of Islam, as opposed to Sunnis who dominate the other GCC states, perhaps helping explain why Qaboos tends to shun GCC meetings. (The next summit is scheduled to be held in the Qatari capital in late December.) Relations with other GCC members are correct, with the exception of neighboring UAE. In 2011, Oman arrested several UAE citizens, accusing them of spying. The spy ring was trying to operate in one of the royal palaces.

Historically, Oman has had close relations with Britain. In the early 1970s, British forces, along with units from Jordan and the shah's Iran, helped quell a tribal rebellion in the south of the country, supported from then communist South Yemen. The United States has since developed a close relationship with Qaboos, gaining the right to use Omani air bases, including one on Masirah Island, which was used in the failed attempt to rescue the U.S. embassy hostages in Tehran in 1979. The Omani army operates both British and U.S. tanks, while the air force has British Eurofighters and U.S.-made F-16s. The Omani navy is dominated by British-supplied patrol ships.

Oman is comparatively progressive, having an elected consultative assembly as well as an appointed council of state. The current Omani ambassador in Washington DC is a woman. Nevertheless, when the Arab Spring demonstrations broke out across the region in 2011, Oman faced problems with riots in Sohar, an industrial city. The only other GCC state to be similarly affected was Bahrain, though the troubles there were more attributable to divisions between Sunni and Shiite communities. Qaboos has used a carrot-and-stick approach to political challenges at home, clamping down on protests in the streets and via social media but promising increased jobs and benefits. More recently, he pardoned some protestors and an Omani court sentenced a former minister to prison for corruption.

The failure to select a favored successor has led to several candidates emerging within the extended royal family, said to have fifty to sixty significant male members. In 1995, Qaboos announced an intriguing method of selection: if the family could not agree, he had written down the names of his two preferred candidates and put them in a sealed envelope for the "defense council" to open after his death. In 2011, he clarified this scheme. Article 6 of the Omani constitution now reads: "If the Royal Family Council does not agree on a choice of a Sultan for the Country, the Defense Council together with the Chairman of the Council of State, the Chairman of the Consultative Council, and the Chairman of the Supreme Court along with two of his most senior deputies, shall instate the person designated by His Majesty the Sultan in his letter to the Royal Family Council."

A 2012 Reuters story identified several possible candidates being mentioned in Muscat. Three are brothers -- all cousins of Qaboos -- Assad, Shihab, and Haitham bin Tariq al-Said. The first two have military backgrounds, and the third is the culture minister and a former diplomat, also said to be indecisive. The selection process will further have to be acceptable to the wider Omani population, particularly the tribes that dominate life outside the main cities, if it is to be successful.

The U.S. interest is both immediate as well as long term. To facilitate nuclear diplomacy with Iran, Oman still appears to have a crucial role. After all, Kerry and Zarif could have met in a European capital. In the long term, what follows Qaboos will indicate the competence of the Gulf region's hereditary monarchies in managing their futures. The sultan's reign has been longer than that of any other GCC leader, and Oman has generally prospered under what has been effectively his cult of personality. But despite the *Times of Oman* report today that "special prayers were held to pay gratitude to the Almighty for keeping him in good health," Oman is now facing the ultimate test of whether the system will survive Qaboos.

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