

The U.S. Must Reinforce Its Important Relationship with Oman in 2020

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The small Gulf kingdom of Oman has been a friend of the U.S. for more than two centuries while serving as an important diplomatic actor behind the scenes.

As Oman enters a new era under the rule of Sultan Haitham, the U.S. should take steps to deepen the strong economic, diplomatic, and security partnership.

Vice President Mike Pence should lead a senior U.S. delegation to meet the new sultan in the coming days, and the sultan should be invited for a White House visit.

On January 10, 2020, Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said passed away. Within hours, the late sultan's first cousin, the 66-year-old Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, was named as Qaboos's successor. The United States and Oman share many geopolitical challenges, and have had good relations dating back two centuries. Under the leadership of Sultan Haitham, U.S.–Omani relations will be entering a new chapter. The Trump Administration should take this new opportunity to build on existing relations by sending a senior delegation led by Vice President Mike Pence to Muscat in the coming days, inviting Sultan Haitham to the White House as soon as mutually convenient, sending a message to Oman's neighbors that the U.S. does not want any instability during the transition period, and reaffirming Oman as a trustworthy partner in meeting many of the challenges facing the region.

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An Unusual Transition

Sultan Qaboos ruled Oman since taking power from his father, with the help of the British, in a bloodless palace coup in 1970. Sultan Qaboos was the longest-serving ruler in the Middle East and one of the longest-serving monarchs in the world. He was considered one of the world's top statesmen. Qaboos had been unwell for some time and spent almost a year in Germany in 2014 and 2015 and a week in Belgium in December 2019 for medical treatment.

Because he had no children and no heir apparent, there was a unique process as part of Oman's Basic Law to name his successor upon his death. Essentially, if the Royal Family Council could not agree on a successor within three days of death, an envelope was to be opened which contains the late Sultan's preferred successor. It appears that the Royal Family Council did not even try to agree on a successor and instead went straight to the envelope to find Haitham's name.

Sultan Haitham's accession to the throne was not a complete surprise. Most Oman watchers suspected he was one of three possibilities.¹ Haitham has spent decades in government in different roles, including as a senior official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. More recently, Haitham served as Oman's Minister for Heritage and Culture. Perhaps most important, though, he served as the person responsible for the sultanate's "Vision 2040"—an ambitious program of economic and social reforms for Oman. Therefore, Sultan Haitham will be acutely aware of the economic challenges facing Oman and the reforms that are needed to address them.

Centuries-Old Relations

While Oman does not receive the same attention in the U.S. as other Gulf states, the U.S.–Omani relationship is close. Oman's free trade agreement with the U.S.—the sultanate's only bilateral trade agreement—has been in force since 2009. There is also a close military relationship: The U.S. Navy enjoys access to the strategically located Duqm and Salalah ports, and the U.S. (albeit with advance notice and for specified purposes) has permission to use Oman's military airfields in Muscat, Thumrait, and on Masirah Island. The Royal Air Force of Oman operates U.S.-built F-16s, and each year around 100 Omani officers are trained at military schools in the U.S.

Although multilateral organizations, such as the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), exist, it is in America's interest to maintain close bilateral relations with individual countries in the region. Oman is a

pre-eminent example, and Muscat brings many important—and in some cases, unique—attributes to the table. Specifically:

1. **Oman has served as an important interlocutor for the U.S. in the region.** This role brings an important dimension to U.S. engagement in the region. Since a majority of its citizens are Ibadi, Oman has been able to avoid the sectarian Sunni–Shia fault line that has been the origin of so much violence and conflict in the region. This position has allowed Oman to play a unique behind-the-scenes role in facilitating many diplomatic initiatives in the region.
2. **For historical reasons, Oman has a very close relationship with America’s closest ally, the United Kingdom.** Within hours after his accession, Prime Minister Boris Johnson visited the new sultan. The previous sultan owed his rule to the British. In addition, the U.K. helped Oman to quell the Dhofar Rebellion (1962–1975). There is already very close Anglo–American cooperation in the Gulf, and trilateral U.S.–U.K.–Omani cooperation in the region has strategic benefits for the U.S.
3. **For historical and geographical reasons, Oman has a unique relationship with Iran.** Under certain circumstances, this relationship could be beneficial to the U.S. Over the years, Oman has helped to secure the release of U.S. hostages in Iran (and also in Yemen). Oman and Iran are the two countries on either side of the Strait of Hormuz. Like Britain, pre-revolutionary Iran provided 4,000 troops to help Oman defeat the Dhofar Rebellion. Often, Oman’s relationship with Iran is misunderstood by policymakers in the West. Publicly, Oman maintains cordial and pragmatic relations with Iran because of the geographical and historical links. Privately, senior officials express the concerns about Iran’s malign activities—which are concerns around the Gulf region.
4. **Oman tends to offer an alternative and important point of view inside the GCC.** With the Gulf crisis among Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar simmering on, Oman’s regional views should be seen by the U.S. as a strength, not a weakness. Oman is very cautious, continuously balancing its relations with all countries in the region, including both Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The new sultan has stated that he will continue his predecessor’s balanced foreign policy approach.²

5. Oman sees Israel as an important actor for regional stability.

This is why the late Sultan Qaboos hosted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Muscat in December 2018, even though Oman and Israel do not have diplomatic relations. Oman's foreign minister also met with Prime Minister Netanyahu in Warsaw in February 2019. It is likely that Oman will play a key role behind the scenes in any Israel–Palestinian peace proposal from the Trump Administration.

6. Oman is a regional and Islamic leader in preventing radicalism.

Not a single Omani citizen is known to have joined the ranks of ISIS.³ The Australian-based Institute for Economics and Peace's *Global Terrorism Index 2019*, which assesses the impact of terrorism on countries using a scale of zero to 10, ranks Oman a zero, making it one of only 26 countries in the world—and the only country in the Middle East and North Africa—to achieve this score.⁴

A New Era

The U.S. needs to use the early days of Sultan Haitham's new rule to reinforce the U.S.–Omani relationship. This can be accomplished by:

- **Vice President Pence leading a senior delegation to Oman to meet the new Sultan.** Within 36 hours of Haitham accepting the title of sultan, Prime Minister Johnson visited Sultan Haitham. All leaders of the GCC have also visited Muscat. The U.S. should send a senior delegation led by Vice President Pence to meet with the new sultan as soon as possible. This will send the right message to Oman and its neighbors about U.S. commitment to the bilateral relationship.
- **Inviting the new sultan to the White House for a state visit.** President Trump should extend an invitation for a state visit to Sultan Haitham as soon as mutually convenient. In addition to an early visit by Vice President Pence, this invitation will send the right message to Oman and its neighbors about the U.S. commitment to the bilateral relationship.
- **Sending a message to the region that the U.S. does not want any trouble in Oman.** With the war in Yemen unresolved, the crisis with Iran and the Gulf dispute lingering on, and Iran's recent aggression, the last thing the U.S. needs is any malign foreign influence in Oman

during this delicate time. The U.S. values Oman's peaceful role in the region and it is in America's interests that the transition process with the new sultan goes smoothly. An announcement of a joint U.S.–Omani military exercise, or a visit by the U.S. Navy to Duqm, should demonstrate America's seriousness to stability in Oman and its relations with Muscat.

- **Pursuing a free trade agenda with the new sultan.** The current steel and aluminum tariffs in place by the United States not only negatively affect relations with notable American allies, such as Canada and the U.K., but also smaller ones, such as Oman. Over the years, Oman has done much to diversify its economy, and the steel and aluminum sectors have played a key role. Not only are these tariffs bad for the American consumer, they also needlessly complicate America's bilateral relationships—especially with Oman.

Conclusion

In a region where many issues are dangerously viewed starkly as “black and white,” Oman's nuanced and deliberate approach to regional challenges makes Muscat an important voice in the Gulf. As the Trump Administration continues to advance U.S. interests in the Middle East, now is the time for the U.S. to reinforce its relationship with Oman under the new sultan. For centuries, Oman has been a friend of the U.S. while serving as an important diplomatic actor behind the scenes in the region. Good relations with Muscat will benefit not only the U.S., but the U.K. and other partners in the region as well.

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Endnotes

1. Sigurd Neubauer, "Succession in Oman: Clues But No Clarity," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, March 17, 2017, <https://agsiw.org/succession-in-oman-clues-but-no-clarity/> (accessed January 13, 2020).
2. Kelly M. McFarland, "The Death of Oman's Sultan Leaves a Void in a Volatile Region," Responsible Statecraft, January 12, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/01/12/the-death-of-omans-sultan-leaves-a-void-of-stability-in-a-volatile-region/> (accessed January 13, 2020).
3. Mirren Gidda, "How Much Longer Can Oman Be an Oasis of Peace in the Middle East?" *Newsweek*, January 28, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/2017/02/10/oman-sultan-qaboos-terrorism-isis-al-qaeda-548682.html> (accessed January 13, 2020).
4. Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, November 2019, p. 8, <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf> (accessed January 13, 2020).