

SUDDEN SUCCESSION



Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East

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Oman After Qaboos: A National and Regional Void

The ailing Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said, now seventy-nine years old, has no children and no announced successor, with only an ambiguous mechanism in place for the family council to choose one. This study considers the most likely candidates to succeed the sultan, Oman's domestic economic challenges, and whether the country's neutral foreign policy can survive Qaboos's passing.



In November 2019, while presiding over Oman's National Day celebration at the Wudam naval base, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who has ruled his country for nearly five decades, looked particularly frail. It was correspondingly of little surprise that on December 7 he departed for Belgium to undergo a series of medical tests at Leuven's University Hospitals. In 2014–15, the sultan spent eight months in Germany while receiving apparently successful treatment for colon cancer. But his latest trip abroad coincided with rumors of a significant deterioration in his health.¹ Although he has now returned to Oman, the prognosis for any seventy-nine-year-old with diabetes and a history of colon cancer is likely to be bleak.

For Oman, there would be no good time to lose the sultan, who has ushered his country into the modern age. Sultan Qaboos has overseen a spectacular trajectory of development over fifty years that delivered Oman upward from an era of one primary school, one medical clinic, and no tarmac road connecting its only international airport to the capital. Moreover, the sultan's genuine popularity serves as the primary unifying factor in his country and protects it from the continuous debilitating strife seen, for example, in neighboring Yemen.

With succession in the offing, the sultan's lack of an heir from his one brief marriage and his decision to not identify a successor make for mystery and some anxiety. The sultan may be following the Ibadi tradition in Islam, wherein the Imam (a role the sultan also fulfills) does not appoint a successor.² More likely, though, given Oman's colorful history of coups within the royal family, including one he perpetrated himself, the sultan has sought to avoid identifying an apparent alternative to himself. In at least five cases since the 1850s, the Omani leader has been assassinated, deposed, or otherwise removed from power (see table 1).

Understandably, the sultan's choice to not groom a successor has been cause for worry among international diplomats and businesses that regularly deal with Oman. Such uncertainty has led to concern over the competence of any successor because relationships that could help—or influence—the new sultan cannot be developed in advance of his taking power. That

TABLE 1. ILL-FATED OMANI SULTANS

Thuwaini bin Said	r. 1856–66	Killed in his sleep by his son Salem bin Thuwaini
Salem bin Thuwaini	r. 1866–68	Deposed by his cousin Azzan bin Qais
Azzan bin Qais	r. 1868–71	Not recognized by British; killed in battle
Taimur bin Faisal	r. 1913–32	Abdicated to his son Said bin Taimur under pressure
Said bin Taimur	r. 1932–70	Deposed by his son Qaboos bin Said (current sultan)

Source: Michael Field, *Arabian Ruling Family Chart, Al-Busaidi Family*, 2019.

same uneasiness might well be felt among Omanis, who face an uncertain future without the steadying hand of their leader who has steered the country to modernity through five turbulent decades.

Many briefs on Omani leadership succession have focused on the succession process, including the infamous secret envelopes in the sultan's metaphorical desk drawer.³ Despite the intrigue, there are very few modern examples from the Persian Gulf region wherein succession processes go wrong; the main complaint would seem to be that the process is opaque to Western observers and those tasked to comment on it. With acknowledgment that historical precedent is not infallible and as part of a larger series on Middle East successions, this study examines the Omani succession process and whether it runs smoothly or not. But perhaps more critically, this study concentrates on the transition challenges that a successor might face—excluding the headache of managing one's own mounted camel band, an international portfolio of luxury homes, and one of global royalty's most prestigious yachts.

Immediate Challenges

The oil has always been running out in Oman, which is more dependent in fiscal terms on oil and gas revenues than are almost all its neighbors. In truth, the country's energy parastatal, Petroleum Development Oman, has had an extraordinarily successful record

of squeezing oil out of extremely difficult subsurface geology, with oil and gas output each never far from one million barrels per day and identified reserves keeping pace with extraction. Yet Oman's GDP and population have expanded enormously over the past twenty years, as have the social and infrastructure costs of keeping a high-dependency population happy in a still highly paternalistic society. Omani oil revenues can no longer keep up with expenditures, though, let alone feed sovereign wealth funds to safeguard the future, and this is particularly true when the price of oil or the global economy slumps.

Especially during the last oil-price fall of 2014–17, the Omani government made a concerted attempt to expand the non-oil economy through the National Programme for Enhancing Economic Diversification, referred to locally as *Tanfeedh* (meaning “implementation”). This move revealed the government's acknowledgment of the Omani economy's need to be less monopolistic and less regulated so as to welcome foreign investment and to encourage small and medium-size Omani private enterprises. Plans were made and a raft of liberalizing laws reached the final draft stage, but very little reform was actually enacted.

This stasis puzzled even Omanis directly involved in the reform program, though two factors may have been at work. First, the sultan, who has remained his own prime minister among much else, would historically have been the driving force behind such a program of reform, but his illness and age have sapped his energy. As one senior Omani has said privately, “The sparkle has left his eyes.” Without Sultan Qaboos's push, the reform program has faltered; he may even believe that his life's work is done. Second, a regulated economy works best for the established and influential merchant families who, with the sultan's blessing, have always dominated Omani economic life. Why would they want to cede the advantages that *wasta* (political connection) brings, share their market dominance, and lose what opportunities there are for growth to young entrepreneurs who are fresh to the market? Somehow, subtly, it would appear that the merchant oligopoly has applied the brakes to the market liberalization process.

The dichotomy persists. Spending cuts are planned

but are difficult to enact because—as shown by the Ministry of Finance's own data—the government is the source of so much spending, and thus government cuts affect a broad swath of the population. Official numbers indicate that Oman's fiscal account deficit has roughly halved since 2016 and suggest that 2019 will show further improvement.⁴ But whenever oil and gas proceeds come in above estimates, huge pressures emerge to spend the surplus, rather than save it. And non-oil revenue has not risen, falling even as a percentage of total tax take, so almost all the improvements made to fiscal balancing can be attributed to increased oil and gas revenues. Moreover, the IMF's forecast over the next five years indicates further fiscal deterioration, which will necessitate additional drawing on already meager reserves and threaten an existential crisis even before factoring in the next global economic slump.

Nonetheless, some progress is being made, particularly of late. The *Tanfeedh* program has been wrapped into the Supreme Council for Planning's strategic planning effort, which is skillfully directed by Omanis sensitive to national needs and not dominated by “global best practice” consultancies that, for example, have shaped the effort in Saudi Arabia. The problem remains of attracting private finance for *Tanfeedh* initiatives—those with government funding get off the ground, but the majority of projects need private financing, which is less forthcoming because of barriers to entry and the still-difficult regulatory environment. To supplement the diversification-focused *Tanfeedh* program, the recently launched *Tawazun* (“balance”) initiative resembles programs in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that seek to gain local advantage from defense spending on arms projects.⁵ Given the large percentage of GDP devoted to defense spending and the ineffectiveness of the previous offset arrangements, *Tawazun* will both directly benefit the non-oil economy and counterbalance the much-rumored history of defense deals that supposedly aid only a privileged few.⁶ Backing up these initiatives are the long-term strategic investments of the sovereign wealth funds, in particular the Oman Oil Company, with its plans moving ahead quickly to develop Sohar and to build a new petrochemical and industrial city at Duqm on

the southern coast.

Without a healthy economy and ample social welfare spending, Omani security and stability face risks. This was demonstrated in 2011 during the uprisings, when relatively peaceful protests occurred, particularly in the key cities of Sohar and Salalah. Unrest is never far below the surface in Oman, a reality well disguised by the efficiency with which the Internal Security Service normally neutralizes problems before they arise. Sources of discontent—such as the balance of advantage between tribes and regions, splits between the adherents of Sunni and Ibadi Islam (plus a few Shia), the historic division of the territory between the coast and capital as well as between the capital, the extremities of Dhofar and Musandam, and the interior—can be exacerbated by economic hardship and potentially by outsiders. Any social and political problems become more acute as expectations rise while real incomes do not.

Then there is the potential external threat. Although Oman is not under direct threat of invasion, interference from a neighbor is possible. Oman has indeed resisted overtures from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Both countries seek to exert leadership over the region and are suspicious about Oman's relationship with Iran, and more recently with Yemen's Houthis.



Fears lurk in Oman that Abu Dhabi, which has not forgotten that Oman declined the Emirati invitation to join the new UAE federation in 1971, has long-term plans to assert its influence should the domestic security situation in Oman facilitate such an intervention. Some Omanis believe that growing UAE involvement in their economy and the granting of UAE passports to Omani citizens are tangible indications of such intent. Leaders in Oman are also concerned about the Saudi intervention in the eastern Yemeni governorate of al-Mahra, which is connected tribally to Dhofar on the border between Yemen and Oman. Furthermore, quiescent border issues might be revived, particularly those around the Buraimi Oasis and in the Musandam Peninsula, the physically separate piece of Omani territory abutting the Strait of Hormuz. Lingering tensions were made apparent in 2019 when yet another Emirati spy ring was uncovered in Oman, albeit of less importance than that uncovered in 2010. Nonetheless, Muscat felt sufficiently concerned to enact a law that required Gulf Cooperation Council nationals to give up ownership of land and property almost everywhere in Oman except Muscat. This law affected Emiratis in particular. To surmount and resolve all these issues, the leadership succession in Oman needs to go smoothly.

Forget the Envelope?

One or two steps constitute the process for selecting the successor to the sultan of Oman. These steps are described in the constitution—what Omanis call the Basic Law or White Book.⁷ First, the Royal Family Council must attempt to agree on a successor within three days after the death of the sultan. Although the exact composition of the Royal Family Council is not known, it is presumed to comprise the adult males of the family, who number at least several dozen. This council has not met for decades because the sultan is not one to seek his family's advice or to create an alternative power center, but it is nonetheless likely to be convened in the days after his death by most credible candidates for succession.

If the Royal Family Council cannot agree, the Defense Council together with the chairs of the State Councils (Majlis al-Dawla and Majlis al-Shura), the chair of the

Supreme Court, and the two eldest Supreme Court deputies will oversee the opening of a letter written by the late sultan in which he has nominated his successor.

It is possible that the Royal Family Council will select the next sultan during its three days of deliberations. In similar systems in other Gulf countries, a leading candidate tends to emerge through negotiations and tradeoffs made among members of the family; those who do not win use the process to secure concessions from the candidate who is finally crowned. Members of the royal family may be loath to allow the selection process to devolve to the Defense Council stage because the council excludes the royal family and opens proceedings to senior figures who are outside the ruling family's deliberations. However, because the meeting does not have an established procedure and because many older Omani royals—especially those from the family's outer reaches—are unfamiliar with the needs of the younger generation, doubts must still exist that the Royal Family Council will come to a decision in three days. These doubts are likely compounded by the timing of the meeting during a state funeral that may be attended by a host of foreign dignitaries, many of whom, because of Oman's neutrality policy, may be forced to share a space with political adversaries.

Succession Prospects

According to the Omani constitution, the successor must be:

- A male descendant of Sultan Turki bin Said (r. 1871–88), a requirement that in effect excludes the Zanzibari branch of the family and members of the wider nonroyal al-Busaidi tribe.
- A legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents, which excludes any family members with foreign mothers. Complicating this seemingly simple requirement, many royal Omanis have foreign grandmothers, and it is not clear whether that precludes them from succession.
- Mature and rational—a purposefully vague condition.

According to a thorough reading of the known family tree, a minimum of thirty-plus eligible candidates are currently alive, an approximation necessitated by

uncertainty surrounding the aforementioned qualification criteria.⁸ Many eligible candidates are obviously unsuitable (for example, because of age) or live permanently abroad. Others seem more suitable because they have government experience, they are close to the sultan on the family tree, their lineage is more purely Omani, or they have married into the wider al-Busaidi tribe to which the al-Said family belongs.

NEXT GENERATION CANDIDATES

Traditional succession deliberations in Oman typically identify three candidates. Though perhaps past their prime in age, the three current candidates stand out because they are close to the sultan on the family tree (first cousins) and because they have relevant government or military experience.

Sayyed Assad bin Tariq bin Taimur al-Said, born in 1954, was promoted into a possible heir apparent position as deputy prime minister in March 2017. He is a larger-than-life character with charisma, energy, and a commanding presence. Assad is generally well liked and connects easily with ordinary Omani people and tribal leaders. He speaks good English, his Arabic is educated and authoritative in tone, and he attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst for his initial military training. Assad had a low period upon leaving the army after a successful career as an armored corps officer; he had been eager to become army commander and felt sidelined and depressed when he did not. This was a passing phase, however, and Assad is now confident and healthy, no longer the impetuous cavalry officer he once was. Assad's strength was never his business acumen or his strategic thinking, but rather his tribal connections, his command of the loyalty of the armed forces, and his strong position within the royal family. He is married to the daughter of the minister responsible for defense affairs, Badr bin Saud al-Busaidi. Of all the candidates, Assad could probably deliver the smoothest transition, but thereafter might struggle to undertake the deep reforms the Omani economy needs.

Sayyed Haitham bin Tariq bin Taimur al-Said, born in 1954 and a half brother of Assad, is quieter and less assertive, with a much greater interest in business

affairs. He is believed to want the position of sultan. Haitham's initial excursion into the world of business was a disaster: Blue City was intended to be an \$18 billion mega mixed-use development project on the coast at al-Sawadi. An initial \$925 million was raised via an international bond sale, but the project collapsed when nobody showed interest in buying plots at inflated prices. When this happened in 2012, the Omani sovereign wealth fund's Oryx Investments was forced to bail out bondholders, but questions arose as to where the money had gone. Generous analyses of the situation suggest that Haitham, who was a 50 percent shareholder in the company that controlled the Blue City project, was led astray by unsuitable business associates. In more recent investment endeavors, he has apparently been more successful. Since 2002, Haitham has been Oman's minister of heritage and culture, and from 1986 to 2002 he held roles in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹ He occasionally chairs the cabinet meetings when Deputy Prime Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sayyed Fahd bin Mahmoud al-Said is absent. Haitham would likely be the favorite candidate of the merchant family oligopoly, with whom he has financial links.

Sayyed Shihab bin Tariq bin Taimur al-Said, born in 1956, had—like his full brother, Haitham—a successful military career, having been an effective navy commander for many years until 2004. He is a sober, modest, and reflective man, not ambitious but clearly capable and competent. He is also quite religious. Shihab has had a successful business career since leaving the navy. Unlike his two aforementioned brothers, he is not a member of the Council of Ministers—although he is an advisor to the sultan—and would likely need to be persuaded to take on the role of sultan. He is also apparently the *de facto* chair of royal family affairs and would have a critical role in the three-day life of the Royal Family Council.

Of the older generation, though, the most experienced candidate would be Sayyed Fahd bin Mahmoud al-Said, born in 1944 and current deputy prime minister for cabinet affairs. Fahd has in effect been the sultan's business manager for prime ministerial matters since nearly the beginning of the sultan's reign in 1970.

Wise, politically astute, and extraordinarily loyal, Fahd would probably be of more value performing the same role for the next sultan, rather than serving as a leader in his own right. His choice to marry a Frenchwoman has given him happiness at home but has rendered his own children ineligible for succession. This could potentially make his own candidacy less viable.

YOUNGER GENERATION CANDIDATES

Candidates from the generation after the bin Tariq brothers are less easy to identify. It is worth noting that none identified thus far from this generation appears to have a military background, which circumstances suggest could be useful for securing support. For a member of the royal family, the ease of securing a government position presents a more comfortable career option than working one's way up through the ranks of the armed forces—but the comfortable option does not help much in securing a wide base of support. Those who have opted for business careers instead risk being tainted by suspicions that business success comes easier to those with good government connections than to ordinary people not blessed by the advantages of *wasta*.

A longtime favorite from this generation younger than fifty has been Sayyed Taimur bin Assad bin Tariq al-Said, and he became so when he married the sultan's niece. The lavish four-day wedding celebration sponsored by the sultan became known locally as "The One Thousand and One Nights." Currently assistant secretary-general for international relations at the Oman Research Council, Taimur also founded and chairs the Alizz Islamic Bank, which made its first profit in 2018 since commencing operations in September 2013. Taimur's stake in the bank brings him into partnership with Al Abbar, a UAE investment fund, and a proposed merger with Oman Arab Bank would cement a relationship with the Zubair merchant family. Both represent useful linkages but might raise questions among a wider audience about Taimur's independence.

Other prominent royals are possible, but unlikely, dark horse candidates for succession—their age, prominence, and experience levels are significantly lower than those of the bin Tariq brothers. However, like

Taimur, they may be on the radar for future succession. These possible candidates include the following:

- Sayyed Faisal bin Turki bin Mahmoud al-Said, born in 1973, is the chief executive officer of Oman Brand Management Unit. He has a good reputation and increasing prominence.
- Sayyed Fahr bin Fatik bin Fahr bin Taimur al-Said, likely born in the 1980s, is deputy chair of the Fatik bin Fahr Group, his father's company.
- Sayyed Dhiyazin bin Haitham bin Tariq al-Said is the son of Sayyed Haitham and on the younger side.

OUTSIDER CANDIDATES OF CHAOS

Most observers of Oman cannot imagine a succession taking place outside the current rule book. But should the succession process falter or should civil unrest occur at the same time, the opportunity might present itself for a candidate from outside the royal family. In addition to making a strong economic pitch, such a candidate would certainly require support from at least some sections of the armed forces if he were to consolidate what would inevitably be a tenuous initial grip on power. More likely, such an outcome would be possible only if it were sponsored and supported by a neighboring state. Many Omanis believe that the UAE has prepared itself accordingly for such an eventuality and has a preferred, high-flying, nonroyal candidate in mind, albeit one who would lack popular support.

After Modernization, the Need for Reform

If Qaboos has brought about a spectacular arc of development in Oman, ushering the sultanate into the modern world, then the new sultan's success will be measured by his ability to deliver much-needed reforms—transforming the country from an oil-dependent rentier economy to a more balanced socioeconomic model. Whoever gets the job faces enormous challenges—both in consolidating his personal authority domestically and regionally and in embarking on the painful restructuring necessary to fend off economic decline and, consequentially, social instability.

In establishing his authority within the region, the

new sultan will not have been groomed for the role as deeply as peers such as Muhammad bin Zayed of the UAE or Muhammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, both of whom will have run their respective countries from the safety of the crown prince seat for years before their likely elevation to ruler. Oman watchers are concerned that the aggressive leadership of the country's two neighbors may affect the succession process, possibly trying to pressure the new sultan in his vulnerable early days to forgo Oman's traditional practice of "neutral" foreign policy, which has brought the sultanate too close to Iran for Saudi and Emirati comfort.

Oman's balancing-act foreign policy has been a staple of the country since before Qaboos came to power. Unlike his shuttle diplomacy-inclined neighbor Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah of Kuwait, Sultan Qaboos has tended to act not as a mediator but as a facilitator. Oman has prided itself on welcoming all parties into its home and giving them the space and security needed to talk. Such an open-arms policy has long perturbed Oman's neighbors, given that many individuals exiled from these countries have ended up graciously accepted in Oman. However, this neutral role has been critical for the United States over the years and, in a recent example, was fundamental to several major breakthroughs between the United States and Iran under the Obama administration.

On Iran, post-Qaboos bilateral ties will likely be decided in Tehran rather than Muscat. As with Qatar after the 2017 rift, however, Oman will do everything to preserve its ties with the United States. But the simple fact that the traffic lanes through the Strait of Hormuz pass through both Omani and Iranian territorial waters means that, for the forty years since Iran's Islamic Revolution, Oman has been on the cusp of a center-stage role in an international crisis. As seen elsewhere, U.S. and British military ties have been a deterrent to aggressive Iranian tactics against Oman. And the incentive of trading links and shared offshore oil and gas prospects has no doubt restrained Tehran. But such past experience is no guarantee of future behavior.

Senior Omani officials generally do not express any concern that the balancing aspect of Omani foreign policy will change under new leadership or in the face

of regional pressure. In their view, Oman's ties with Iran as well as other eyebrow-raising relationships, such as that with Israel, are unlikely to shift dramatically under new leadership. In the case of Israel, even if the Saudis and Emiratis had a say, their concern would not be the Israel-Oman relationship, so that will likely continue on a similar path.

Omanis see their foreign policy as having a longer history than that of either Saudi Arabia or the UAE. They speak about their open attitude toward all actors in the region as part of their identity as Omanis, not as part of Qaboos's legacy specifically. On this count, both the United States and United Kingdom appear to have acknowledged the potential for trouble and signaled their support—hence, both have recently renewed and upgraded their defense cooperation agreements with Oman. The sultanate has long been close with Britain, and Qaboos has a particular affinity for Britain from having attended Sandhurst and served in the British military. Indeed, this relationship is set to outlast the succession. In addition, Omanis often cite that Oman was the first Arab nation to send an envoy recognizing the United States in the 1840s as evidence of an enduring relationship.¹⁰ The recent defense agreements cement these two core relationships. For the first time, Britain has committed to permanently stationing forces in the country, in addition to the substantial loan-service presence of British officers who have long been integrated within the Omani armed forces.

Assuming all goes well on the international front, the new sultan's greatest challenges in the near to medium term will clearly be domestic. First and foremost, he will need to command the loyalty of his own armed forces. Turning to economic reform, the sultan will require the courage to impress upon the wealthy merchant families—where economic influence is concentrated—that without their participation, their sacrifice, and a radical rebalancing of the economy, the whole ship of state will founder. The economy needs to be prepared for a post-oil future, and despite the deployment of sovereign wealth into industrial projects such as those at Sohar and the new port city of Duqm, the substantial economic rebalancing required will not happen unless it is led by private enterprise. Thus, the new sultan's policy priority will be to deliver the market conditions in which private enterprise will flourish. Security and social stability are prerequisites for such success, and cementing the loyalty of the armed forces and security services will help create these conditions. The new sultan, however, must also come up with a social engagement strategy that replicates the effectiveness of Sultan Qaboos's famous outreach tours through the interior and hinterlands of Oman in the 1970s, which were conducted to shore up support after Qaboos overthrew his father. This new engagement strategy must be modern and nimble enough to win over the social media generation, which, like in other Gulf countries, constitutes the bulk of Oman's population.

Notes

¹ Associated Press, “Oman’s Sultan, 79, Travels to Belgium for Medical Checks,” December 7, 2019, <https://apnews.com/5b163c03cce4a5d4034bc0b87581bd12>.

² Michael Field, *Arabian Ruling Family Chart*, Al-Busaidi Family, 2019. Ibadī Islam comprises a relatively small group of Muslims, perhaps three million or so, whose practice predates the Sunni-Shia split. Ibadīs form a majority in only one country—Oman—but they are also present in parts of North and East Africa, particularly Zanzibar, which belonged to the Omani sultanate from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

³ Simon Henderson, “The Omani Succession Envelope, Please,” *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2017, available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-omani-succession-envelope-please>.

⁴ From 21 percent in 2016, to 9 percent in 2018, to less than the predicted 8.7 percent in 2019.

⁵ This new initiative is not well publicized in the English press. An exception is Ali Al Matani, “Enriching the Economy Through Partnerships,” *Oman Daily Observer*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.omanobserver.om/enriching-the-economy-through-partnerships/>.

⁶ The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute suggests that Oman spends 8.2 percent of GDP on defense, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>. The International Institute for Strategic Studies, in its 2017 Military Balance report, suggests the figure is closer to 15.3 percent, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2017>.

⁷ Royal Decree No. 101/96, “Promulgating the Basic Statute of the State,” Ministry of Legal Affairs, Oman, <http://mola.gov.om/eng/basicstatute.aspx>.

⁸ Field, *Arabian Ruling Family Chart*.

⁹ Specifically, he served as undersecretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Political Affairs (1986–1994) and secretary-general for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1994–2002).

¹⁰ Sultan Qaboos Cultural Center, “Two Centuries of U.S.-Oman Relations,” available at <https://www.sqcc.org/About/U002ES002E-002D-Oman-Relations.aspx>.

About the Editor

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