

Oman's Sultan Devolves Some of His Powers to New Cabinet

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Brief Analysis

In a series of royal decrees that imply a sharp focus on the economy, Sultan Haitham delegated key powers to various ministries for the first time while trimming and professionalizing the government.

Eight months into his rule, the leader of Oman has formed a new cabinet—the first Council of Ministers that he has fully appointed. Multiple decrees issued by Sultan Haitham this week will reduce the government's size, install a strikingly technocratic and experienced cabinet, and devolve significant authority to certain ministers. The appointments mark a distinct shift away from the highly personalized style of rule that existed under the late Sultan Qaboos and toward a more institutionalized model. At the same time, the new council demonstrates a commitment to continuity from the Qaboos era by retaining many ministers, but with a noticeable focus on the economy and finance.

WHICH POWERS HAVE BEEN DEVOLVED?

In the most notable of his twenty-eight decrees, Sultan Haitham gave up the titles of defense minister, foreign minister, finance minister, and chairman of the Central Bank, apportioning them to other officials, in some cases non-royals. This devolution of power—rare among autocratic leaders—is in line with his previous efforts to move away from personalization of the state. In February, for instance, one of his first decrees removed a reference to Sultan Qaboos in the national anthem, replacing it with universal lyrics rather than his own name. Then, on March 9, he appointed his brother Shihab bin Tariq as deputy prime minister for defense affairs, effectively replacing (and retiring) the minister responsible for defense affairs, Badr bin Saud al-Busaidi. According to Omani contacts, this made Sayyed Shihab the de facto defense minister, but with a loftier title, while the sultan remains head of the armed forces.

This week's decrees also elevated two key posts—the minister responsible for foreign affairs and the minister responsible for financial affairs—to foreign minister and finance minister. Both positions have new proprietors as well, implying that the sultan waited to alter the titles until he had decided on new appointees. In addition, Taimur bin Assad, his nephew and a next-generation royal, is now chairman of the Central Bank's board of directors with the rank of minister—a significant promotion for the thirty-nine-year-old.

The sultan retains the title of prime minister, with three previously appointed deputy prime ministers: Assad bin Tariq for international relations and cooperation, the aforementioned Shihab bin Tariq for defense affairs, and Fahd bin Mahmoud for cabinet affairs. Sayyed Assad is strikingly absent from the latest cabinet list, apparently because he has no ministry under him. Thus, while he retains his title of deputy prime minister, his precise role going forward is unclear. Prior to the death of Sultan Qaboos, he was regarded as a top succession candidate along with Haitham, who was ultimately chosen.

Notably, Haitham appointed only **one other royal (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/oman-after-qaboos-a-national-and-regional-void>)** in these decrees. The new minister of culture, sports, and youth is his son Theyazin bin Haitham, who the sultan may wish to groom for eventual succession. The thirty-year-old has been a diplomat since 2013; this January, he returned to Muscat from London, where he served as a second secretary in the embassy.

NEW FOREIGN MINISTER AND FINANCE MINISTER

On the world stage, the most notable change is the replacement of Yusuf bin Alawi, who had served as the minister responsible for foreign affairs since 1997. A Dhofari dissident during the war against Qaboos's father in the 1970s, he reversed course under Sultan Qaboos and was rewarded accordingly. Yet his retirement has been widely expected since Haitham's rise to power, not least because of their widely rumored difficulties with each other when they were both in the Foreign Ministry.

The new foreign minister, Badr bin Hamad al-Busaidi, will be a breath of fresh air. He is well-liked, and U.S. diplomats have referred to him as serious, focused, a great interlocutor, and a good partner to the United States. Born in 1960 in Muscat and educated at Oxford, he has served in the ministry since 1988, including as secretary-general, which entailed working closely with bin Alawi. These and other high-ranking positions made him well-known in foreign policy circles. Although not a royal himself, he is part of the large Busaidi tribe to which the royal family belongs.

Going forward, he is expected to continue Oman's policy of neutrality. This includes balancing relations with the United States and Iran, deciding whether to **normalize relations with Israel as the UAE just did (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-normalization-deal-splits-the-gulf-states-for-now>)**, managing the **increasingly complicated Yemen portfolio (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/challenges-await-omans-new-sultan-as-mourning-period-ends>)**, and guiding policy toward other Gulf Cooperation Council states.

The new finance minister may be just as critical an appointment given Oman's increasingly dire economic situation. Sultan bin Salim al-Habsi has an impressive profile: he has served as a Finance Ministry official since the 1980s, as president of Oman's Tax Authority, as vice president of the board of directors for both the Central Bank and the Oman Oil Company, and as chairman of the Oman Investment Authority. His senior staff and the new Tax Authority chief have similarly long careers in the finance sector.

ENHANCED PROFESSIONALIZATION

Indeed, most of Oman's new or reappointed ministers have decades of experience as capable bureaucrats or

professionals in a related field. For example, the new minister of information formerly served as president of the Public Authority for Radio and Television.

The new cabinet is also notable in how it consolidates twenty-six ministries down to nineteen. Some were merely renamed, such as the Ministry of Oil and Gas becoming the Ministry of Energy and Minerals. Others merged with each other or were subsumed under a new ministry—for example, the Ministries of Justice and Legal Affairs merged (with the legal affairs minister assuming leadership) while the new Ministry of Labor will subsume the Ministries of Manpower and Civil Service, among other changes. Some institutions swapped responsibilities—for example, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture gained the tourism portfolio but lost the culture portfolio to the Ministry of Youth and Sports, resulting in a Ministry of Heritage and Tourism and a Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth.

As indicated above, the focus of the new technocratic government appears to be the economy. The “Vision 2040” development initiative, which Haitham led before his elevation to sultan, now has a new head. And most of the institutions that underwent top-level change are related to the economy, including the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Investment Promotion, and the Ministry of Labor.

More broadly, Sultan Haitham’s appointments seem to reward experience, and the coming months will gauge whether that experience can be turned into measurable results. Initial impressions suggest that his approach to consolidating, professionalizing, and empowering institutional knowledge is just the kind of leadership Oman needs at this critical time.

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